



Policy brief

Changing patterns of relation to work: policy challenges for intergenerational cohesion

Results of the SPReW project

SPReW- Social Patterns of Relation to Work

Funded under the 6th framework programme of the European Union -Citizens and governance

Six countries involved: BE, FR, DE, HU, IT, PT.

May 2006 - August 2008.

<http://www.ftu-namur.org/sprew>

PROJECT RATIONALE

Arduous labour market integration for the youth, ageing workforce, technological change, flexibility, transformation of the value of work and the expectations towards work, etc.: are cultural changes and changes in work and employment convergent or opposite? What are the factors of solidarity and tensions between generations, in the area of work? What are the consequences for the relevance of specific employment or work policies? **The European SPReW project analyses the intergenerational dimensions of changes in the relation to work.** Understanding these changes has both a scientific and a pragmatic relevance. Types of relation to work shape a vision of work, expectations towards work, a vision of careers and management, a relation to knowledge and learning, and specific expectations towards public policies.

OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of this project is to examine the factors leading to solidarity or tensions in intergenerational relations, in the specific area of work and correlated fields. It intends to provide a better and updated understanding of the relation that diverse generations have with work, and to analyse the policy challenges and implications of these changes. The key objectives of the project are:

- to draw out similarities and differences of relation to work for different generations, including the gender and ethnic dimensions;

- to study articulations with other societal fields (family formation and lifestyles, intergenerational relations, social cohesion);
- to develop awareness of public authorities and social actors on the generational dimensions in the relation to work and employment;
- to draw out guidelines for youth policies and ageing policies in this area.

NEW KNOWLEDGE, NEW CONCEPTS AND EUROPEAN ADDED VALUE

Three generations at work: a balance of weakness and strength for each group

Different generations face diverse historical contexts, i.e. a different mix of socio-economical opportunities and constraints and cultural frameworks. Moreover, they have to share labour market opportunities with former generations.

From the SPReW results, we observe that other variables (gender, education, socio-professional groups, economic development, institutional contexts) may overwhelm the effect of the “generation” variable. Particularly “gender”, which has a strong influence on the place that work can have in one’s life. “Age” is also an important variable; young people have a more expressive relation to work. However, historical and cultural differences among *age groups* do exist, as the surveys show. In a broader sense, almost everybody agree in considering **the relevance of institutional factors** (education system, the family, the labour market regulation, the welfare state model, the type of capitalism – in drawing the boundaries among age groups or generations. From this point of view, with some secondary diversities in the different countries, we can identify **three generations of workers** being currently at work: people born before the end of fifties (> 50), people born between this date and the end of seventies (between 30 and 50) and people born after this last date (below 30). From the interviews and focus groups, these three generations results to be “objectively” quite differentiated.

With few differences among countries, **they are diversely positioned on the labour market:**

- Young people (< 30) are more exposed to precariousness and unemployment but they benefit from a positive educational and digital differential.
- The adult generation (30 to 50) usually enjoys a stable position in the labour market but is more exposed to the difficulties related with keeping together career expectations and family care. The position of adult women is especially critical.
- The elder generation (> 50) – when it is still at work – enjoys the best wages and security and the highest representation by trade unions but they are the most exposed in case of company restructuring because of deskilling.

Moreover, different generations also show **different cultures and expectations towards work.**

- Young people (< 30) ask for more social protection and higher income but also for more freedom and opportunity for self-development.
- The adult generation (30 to 50) asks for social and company support for reconciling work and family but also for life-long learning measures in an ageing-worker’s perspective.

- The elder generation (> 50) asks for recognition of experience but also for the an improvement of working conditions.

Intergenerational relations: neither a real conflict, nor a true solidarity

The main objective of the research was to analyse the relations between these three generations, in order to highlight evidence of existing or potential social conflicts. A very rough conclusion on this point is that it does not really emerge a “perception” of conflict among generations from the opinion of most interviewees.

First of all, “age” looks like an “unspoken” issue: although workers were questioned several times on the topic of relation with other generations, most of the interviewees did not appear really interested in this subject. Secondly, there is no full awareness of belonging to a generation: in the biographies, a clear perception of a social or cultural boundary among generations is seldom highlighted. This applies also to the younger generation of workers. Thirdly, other factors, which produce other belongings, appear more relevant as determinants of group cultures at workplace: being a woman, being in a qualified profession or hierarchical grade, being an employee of a well-known organisation... Moreover, in some countries younger people do not even share the same workplaces as the elder ones. Then, especially in some professions a real face-to-face among generations does not even take place.

Anyway, the research point out, “objective” differences among generations are confirmed by the empirical evidence, as far as working conditions are concerned. Then, we should consider the possibility that more awareness of generations may initiate social conflicts in the future.

The relations between the two extreme groups

The two extreme groups seem to face an identical problem, since **both lack a fair recognition at work**. From one side, **young people feel undervalued as for their education**. They frequently complain about low wage and precarious jobs, despite better education and higher ICT knowledge in comparison with the older. From the other side, **old people feel undervalued as for their work experience**. Above all, they fear about losing their job because they are aware that companies are not going to consider any longer the result of many years of learning-by-doing as a real resource. As a matter of fact, old workers often face difficulties in finding a new job, as a consequence of the level of their wage.

The topic of “experience” has been much questioned in the project. In general terms, it appears that the value of experience has been largely retrenched over years, both as a consequence of technological change and also as a value itself (actually, the value of “innovation” scores much higher in the work culture).

Anyway, between these two extreme groups **some incomprehension is evident**. The reasons may be: a kind of incommunicability in the approach to work, due to a diversity in the mix of competencies and especially in the “languages” (digital vs. analogical, global vs. local...); the changing meaning attributed to work in different economic and social periods, where different work values are prevailing (young people often don’t agree with old workers’ centrality of work, while the old ones complain about apparent young people disaffection to work); the psychological distance between ages.

The mid-generation: the most invisible but the most problematic in the future?

Except for some countries, like Italy, where a relevant number of workers above 30 years still experiment precariousness, the mid-generation (30 to 50) is **the most likely to enjoy security benefits, stable jobs and good wages**. Nevertheless, they **often feel threatened both by the increasing deregulation of the labour market** (their perception of the precariousness risk is even greater than the one of younger workers who directly experiment it!) **and by their lack of new skills in comparison to younger workers**. From biographies and focus groups, they appear **a bit envious both of their older colleagues**, who still enjoy early retirement schemes and of the younger ones, more at ease in the digital and flexible society.

From the point of view of the SPReW project, the quality of their skills, their position on the labour market, their attitude towards work are important issues. In fact, **they are going to be soon the ageing workforce** and equitable and sustainable policies for ageing workforce have to be created referring to them.

Moreover, for the **work-life balance issue**, the mid-generation is the most exposed one. The mid-age group is concerned by family building, carrying of children and often also carrying of elder parents. From this perspective, adult (30-50) women appear to be the most critical inter- and intra-generational group.

Are young people different?

On the issue of differences among generations through the dichotomy “instrumental” vs. “expressive” orientation towards work¹, different considerations among partners emerged. From all empirical material, it appears impossible to distinguish the generations according to a specific emphasis on instrumental and/or expressive dimension of work. Some shared evidence emerge: both work orientations concern all generations, although the incidence of each dimension is different; diversity in young workers’ orientations can be either a matter of generation or a matter of age.

In general, contrary to a widespread opinion that young people are more instrumental and less interested by work, **the younger generation appears as the more concerned by the increase of expressive expectations in work and post-materialistic values**.

They are described as: “terrific when working with computers, brilliant at multitasking and very good at working in teams” and also “having values”. They are also the more qualified generation since history. Although they expect “too much too soon” from their job, they seem to be immune to imposed authority and they ask for mutual respect between them and their manager.

Also from the empirical analysis, the younger generation results passionate to work and it has high expectations, both materialist and post-materialist, regarding their job but at the same time it gives great importance to other things in life – **polycentric conception of life**.

(1) There are two or three (depending on the authors) different dimensions in the relation to work. The first dimension is called *instrumental*; it refers to the material expectations, the idea of income, the importance of payment and the possibilities of being promoted. The second dimension is the *social* one; it refers to the importance of the human relations at work. The third dimension is called *symbolic* and has to do with the opportunities to express oneself in an activity, the interest of the work, the feeling of success, the level of autonomy and the social usefulness. Symbolic and social dimensions are sometimes considered together and called the *expressive* dimension of work.

Moreover, younger people expect their work and their personal lives to work together. Then, they result **less afraid about instability and precariousness** than the previous generations.

In general, we observe that **people who invested in education are more demanding and develop higher expectations** of self-fulfilment towards work. These people, often young people with high degree and few family responsibility, prefer “a work they like” to “a safe job” and in they hope that in the future they will have both. According to this view, the relativisation of work is the outcome of young people greater expectations rather than of their disillusion.

What are the conclusions? Some change is occurring in the orientation to work, promoting a more expressive attitude, i.e. a greater request for self-fulfilment in work. It is not evident whether the emerging diversity might be a “generation” effect, meaning that historical, cultural and institutional contexts make the “millennial generation” different from former ones. On the contrary, some of the changes are certainly an “age” effect: young people are always more passionate, they have higher expectations; they are more oriented to the content of work.

Anyway, **neither generation nor age are the only drivers of the changes in the relation to work. Among the others drivers towards a more expressive work orientation, education and gender can be considered as the most important.** Actually, both the educational level of workers (which raises attention to the content of work and self-development) and the feminisation of the labour market (women appear to be more expressive, although they are likely to change their attitude when they have a family to care) increased significantly in recent years.

A gender/generation effect: the contamination of gender models

Common considerations were drawn concerning the relevance of the gender variable in shaping the change between generations. One of the important evidence that has been highlighted by researchers concerns **the change in the culture of the family and the increasing centrality of work-life balance issues for both male and female workers.** In a general way, the research confirms that: women without children tend to have the same behaviour than men at workplace; young men are (very) different from old men as for reconciling work and family life.

Could these new phenomena be considered as emerging signals of a reducing dichotomy between the male and the female models of relation to work? As a matter of fact, we could observe from one side, that many young women want to have a career; they are more competitive; they give more importance to money. From the other side, that young men – especially the qualified ones – ask for a better control on their working time and do not accept anymore to put behind their private life for work, especially when a first baby arrives.

Anyway, the “female model” is hard to die. The research points out as well that: women’s working pattern changes after maternity, from a very expressive to a more instrumental one; women in the mid-generation who have a strong investment in career have more negative experiences than men as regards work-life balance; work-life balance is even worsening for younger generation of women when they have to face both the persisting of strong traditional values and more employment difficulty after the de-regulation of the labour market (Hungary).

How social institutions may affect the relations among generations?

In order to identify what circumstances lead to deal more effectively with different, and often competing, needs of generations at work, the research includes a comparative analysis. The purpose is to discover which features in the institutional contexts are more favourable to solidarity among generations.

From this point of view, in each country, indicators and policies that can be considered as favourable to a good balance between generations and to a generational cohesion are:

- demographic trends and policies aimed at keeping a **balanced birth rate over time**, in order to maintain a good equilibrium between the state expenditure for pensions and the social security contribution coming from employed workers (while actual longer life expectancy and low birth rates are changing the old-age dependency ratio and are threatening the generational equity towards the younger generation);
- employment trends and labour market policies aimed at keeping a **stable activity rate among age cohorts**, both through a balanced flexibility in entries and exits (to prevent the dualisation of the labour market) and incentives aimed at hindering the market tendency to prefer mid-age more productive workers or incentives aimed at confronting company strategies of dismissal of the more expensive older workers;
- structure of the education and training system and policies aimed at a better **transition from school to the labour market** for young workers, at increasing the **employability** of all workers or at facing **skill obsolescence** of older workers (since all these factors contribute to an balanced mix of skill and competencies among workers of different ages);
- dimension and composition of welfare expenditure and policies aimed at a balanced distribution of provisions – both transfers and services – addressing the **different life cycle needs**: youth unemployment and transition to work, reconciling work and family obligations, giving help in case of dismissals and reduced income, etc.

Yet, also **cultural aspects** are likely to produce a relevant impact on the relations between generations. First of all, the **organisation of the family and its role in the economy**: households management, cohabitation, caring of family members, distribution of employment opportunities, internal redistribution of income:

- a tradition of centrality of the family in the economy, together with poor welfare provisions to young people, compel the families to extend cohabitation and financial support to their young members (by consequence, both economic autonomy, marriage and procreation time are delayed);
- a culture of centrality of the family in care-giving, together with poor public or market services for families, lead older active women to renounce to paid work for taking care of old parents and grandchildren.

Connected to this, the **different gender roles in family and in parenthood**. They have important consequences, among others, on the mid-age female participation in the labour market, on the gender and age distribution of part-time jobs, on the management of careers.

Among other social and institutional factors, **industrial relations institutions** is one important: collective bargaining coverage, union membership, trade union presence at the workplace, trade union influence on public opinion:

- high union membership among old workers is likely to condition union policies and collective bargaining towards the maintaining of older workers benefits at the workplace (secure employment, seniority rules) and of generous social protection systems, especially the state expenditures for pensions.
- union involvement in the unemployment allowance administration is likely to promote union joining also among young workers.

Taking into account the evidence from the research, **institutional and company measures should be oriented at:**

- **re-balancing the specific weakness of each generation on the labour market** (i.e. more social protection for young workers, more retraining for the elders, etc.), thus avoiding the risk of a future increased intergenerational unbalance;
- **answering the expectations of each group** (i.e. change in work organisation for young people, more family friendly policies at the company level for the mid-generations, humanisation of work for old workers, etc.);
- **improving understanding between different age groups** and fostering intergenerational cooperation at work (also through the articulation of career paths and the modularisation of the training systems).

Lessons from the analysis of policy practices

From the analysis of a selection of good policy practices collected in the six countries that took part to the project, **some general characteristics** can be pointed out:

- Most practices focus on a specific age group.
- Few practices have an intergenerational orientation.
- Youth related issues are mostly addressed by practices promoting entrepreneurship, knowledge transfer from old to young workers (not vice-versa) and mentoring.
- Managing age diversity is an issue alive, though most practices just focus on matters of knowledge transmission (not on the idea of age diversity as a resource or on the opportunity of a reciprocal recognition by different age groups of workers).
- Active ageing problems – including changes in work organisation, ergonomics and flexible retirement – are not sufficiently addressed.
- Gender related issues – especially the mid-generation work-life balance problems – are scarcely considered.

To a certain extent, there is a gap between the practices collected and the evidence resulting from the empirical investigation (biographical interviews and group interviews). In particular, most practices identified have just a limited focus, namely they tend to address one specific generation rather than taking into account the relations between generations.

Moreover, the practices often show a one-way direction: they may aim at the fostering of the knowledge exchange between generations, but this exchange is mainly from the older age group to the younger one. This results in a disconnection between the practices and the emerging issues of the empirical research, such as the decrease in importance of “experience” and the growing importance of “innovation” and competencies of the young generation (IT literacy, language skills).

Then, no practices are oriented at answering young people expectations for a better quality of working life (new forms of work organisation and larger autonomy in working time and space) or to promote a better integration of adult workers with family commitments (more articulated career opportunities, services and benefits for parents).

In general, from a comparison between empirical results and the collected practices, it emerges an overall picture that conveys **a certain dissonance between needs of different generations and actual institutional and managerial practices.**

Distance from the European policies framework

General objectives of the European strategy for employment and work (Lisbon strategy, European Employment Strategy, EC Green Paper on demographic challenge, Youth pact, etc.) include: full employment and higher quality of work, centrality of workers preferences and family changes, gender as a mainstream objective, active ageing and longer permanence at work, attracting and retaining young workforce, reconciliation between work and family, solidarity between generations.

If we look at the analysed practices on the background of the European institutional framework, it is important to notice that at the European level the **topic of generations** is addressed mostly throughout the following issues:

- **Employment strategy**, namely through age management and incentives for older workers to stay longer on the labour market; integration of young people in the labour market; training for all age groups in order to increase adaptability; promoting solidarity between generations to ensure sustainable and equal social protection.
- **Demographic issues**, by focusing on support to youth, women and older employment, combining work and life cycle and by promoting a new pact between generations.
- **Equality**, in particular through a new approach to age management, mutual learning among generations at the workplace, multidimensional approach to gender as a mainstream issue also in the age perspective.
- **Education**, through the validation of formal and non-formal skills acquired in the course of a working life.

The comparison with the European policy framework underlines again some distance between the European agenda and the practices initiated by central and local governments or social partners. In particular, the distance concerns the lack of measures addressing the generational unbalance of the social protection benefits (unemployment, family supports, pensions); the lack of a life cycle approach in policies; the lack of practices addressing the ageing workforce in the perspective of longer permanence at work.

KEY POLICY MESSAGES

Recommendations to social actors

Consistently, it is now possible to summarise the main implications of the research outcomes from the standpoint of policy making. New challenges seem to emerge and ask for social actors intervention, in order to foster social cohesion and enhance cooperation among

different age groups. Central and local institutions and governments, trade unions and companies are requested to undertake initiatives and remove constraints in the following main areas:

Flexicurity

Flexicurity, understood in a socially sustainable way, is now the main means to cope with young people precariousness in employment and social insecurity. Although they do not always ask for a stable job, they need more protection during transitions from education to employment, from one job to another, during leaves for training and skill updating. Anyway, flexicurity policies will be also useful for other generations when they have to face periods of unemployment or retraining.

Organisation of work

We could observe both a certain “ideological” opposition coming from younger generation towards the traditional hierarchy-based company organisation and also towards time and space constraints and a rather “objective” difficulty to cope with this rigidity for adult workers, especially mothers. In general, companies do not seem to be aware that a big cultural change is coming on regarding the different expectations of workers in the relation to work.

Work life balance and life cycle

The balance between work and other aspects of life is not just a female issue anymore. A good balance does not only call for a new flexible organisation of work but also for services and benefits addressing parents of young children and all workers with family care obligations. Moreover to meet workers’ (especially women’s) career expectations, companies should adopt different rules for career paths, leaving employees the chance to alternate hard/less hard commitment to work in relation to their life cycle.

Lifelong training and knowledge transmission

This policy is important for all the generations. Traditional practices of knowledge transmission and valorisation of experience can be useful in some industrial or professional environments. Nevertheless, with the large diffusion of information and communication technologies, skill maintenance cannot rely anymore just on this kind of practice. Regarding the elder generation, the obsolescence of traditional skills in manufacturing and the lack of foreign languages competencies and client orientation in service sector call for specific retraining actions. Similarly, competencies of the younger generations – especially digital ones which keep changing - should periodically be updated.

Suggestions to different policy actors

Central governments should introduce appropriate social security measures, in the framework of a flexicurity policy (understood in a socially sustainable way) that could ensure:

- more security provisions for youth employment, in order to protect them against periods of unemployment and low income and to provide them health and maternity rights;
- flexible retirement measures for the elderly, in order to allow them to combine less working hours with full security during the last years of career;
- good lifelong training systems and employability to workers of every generation;

- family services and benefits (paid leaves and transfers to children or not self-sufficient family members) to help workers to meet life-cycle needs and to support more balanced demographical trends.

Local governments and local institutions may have a relevant role in:

- organising awareness campaigns on the topic of intergenerational cooperation;
- giving financial supports to projects of mentoring and knowledge exchanges between old workers (and entrepreneurs) and young workers (and entrepreneurs);
- creating family services at local level;
- monitoring the state of the art of existing best practices.

Employers and trade unions at the company level may have important role in:

- changing work organisation and the performance evaluation systems, in order to increase autonomy, time management autonomy, self-development opportunities for young workers;
- introducing new tools for the harmonisation of career opportunities and family care for mid-generation, especially women;
- introducing ergonomics and humanisation of the working conditions: shorter hours, lighter workloads and improvement in the workplace environment for older workers;
- contrasting age discrimination, through measures that remove prejudices against old workers;
- introducing measures aimed at encouraging cooperation and mutual knowledge exchange between old and young workers.

Specific practices to be introduced by company **HR managers** could be:

- age-diversity management, inspired by a managerial philosophy which considers different age-related attitudes and competencies as resources and oriented to facilitate mutual understanding among different age groups;
- practices of knowledge management, i.e. assessment, valorisation and exchange of skills and experience regarding old and young workers and knowledge transmission in both directions;
- more recognition of experience of old workers, also involving them in mentoring projects;
- designing new training systems and career paths according to heterogeneous needs in different life cycle phases;

enhancing job satisfaction, especially addressing young people's expectation of autonomy, mid-generation's needs for flexible working, old generation's needs to avoid too heavy and demanding jobs.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS AND THE METHODOLOGY

The research process developed into several subsequent steps:

- analysis of the existing literature and drawing up hypotheses (desk research);

- description of the changing over time of the relation to work, its meaning for workers belonging to different generations, the societal consequence of the change (analysis of statistical data, qualitative research, narrative interviews, group interviews);
- highlighting the institutional factors, which can lead to solidarity and social cohesion and the ones which may cause tensions among generations (cross-country comparative analysis);
- providing social actors with useful ideas to manage generations at work (collection of good practices, dialogue workshops, recommendations).

IDENTITY OF THE PROJECT

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