

# **Regulating Ageing: Ageing Workforce Management through Collective Bargaining in Italy and the Netherlands**

*Dario Raspanti (Università di Firenze); Luigi Burroni (Università di Firenze); Giulia Cavallini (Università di Firenze)*

Workforce ageing is one of the most critical challenges in contemporary economies. Population ageing and institutional developments, such as pension reforms, are the driving factors of changes in workforce demography. This is evidenced by the significant increase in the number of employees over 50 in the European labour force, which grew by 74% from 40 million to 70 million between 2002 and 2022, compared to a 14% growth in the total number of employed. Older workers stay active for longer, which may have negative consequences for working conditions sustainability over the life span, and firms' competitiveness, also.

Age is a decisive yet underestimated variable of productivity and perceived quality of work. Workers over 50 has specific needs in terms of workplace design, workloads, health and safety issues and so on, which affect the sustainability of a prolonged working life. On the other hand, they could play a decisive role in firms' productivity and competitiveness. Contrary to common sense, ageing is not solely defined by age but comprises social, psychological, organizational, and physiological elements that make its influence on workability multidimensional. Therefore, regulating workforce ageing is crucial for firms' competitiveness and work sustainability.

The social partners could play a crucial role in regulating the effect of the workforce ageing process by interpreting the rule-making function of collective bargaining to develop an inclusive approach to age-related issues. However, the literature on social partners' approaches to workforce ageing is scarce and focus only on Germany and United Kingdom.

Accordingly, our analysis focuses on the role of sectoral collective bargaining in supporting age management, i.e., a proactive management of age-related issues in the labour realm. We adopt a comparative research design by focusing on two Western European countries: Italy and the Netherlands. Today, in Italy, 40% of employees are over 50, against a European average of 34%, while in the Netherlands, older workers are 33% of employees. We conducted a content analysis of Italy and the Netherlands' most representative sectoral collective agreements. We code all the voluntaristic provisions regulating specific dimensions of employee relations (e.g., recruitment, working hours, workload management, and training). These codes were then grouped into types of age management policies: accommodation policies, development policies, exit policies, age diversity policies, and age inclusive

policies.

We find that Dutch collective agreements assume a proactive approach to workforce ageing by targeting older workers with several dedicated provisions. In comparison, Italian collective agreements neglect older workers' specificities apart from a few exceptions focusing on early retirement. We assume that Italian unions adopt a defensive approach to ageing because they perceive older workers as soon-to-be-retired. Unions focus on retirement-related services instead of collective representation on 'proactive measures' due to membership strategies. Indeed, pensioners unions have a pivotal role in Italian unionism compared with the Netherlands since retirees account for half of confederal union members.