

Active Ageing  
through Social Partnership  
and Industrial Relations in Europe.  
Workshop Report  
for Italy

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## Our unit of analysis

We conducted the pilot workshop in Rome, on December 20, 2017, with an employers' representative of agricultural companies (Confagricoltura – Confederation of Italian Agriculture) (male, 32 years old) and a policy officer from CGIL-General Confederation of Italian Workers (female, 30 years old). The workshop was also participated by a post doc researcher with an expertise on managing workers affected by chronic disease (female, 27 years old) and a Ph.D. student (male, 25 years old).

The second workshop was conducted in Rome, on March 8, 2018. This involved an employers' representative from FIPE – Italian Federation of Public Exercises (restaurants, catering and tourism activities) (male, 35 years old) and a policy officer from CISL – Italian Confederation of workers' trade unions (female, 45 years old). The workshop was also participated by a Ph.D. student with an expertise on jobs and professionalism.

The third workshop took place in Rome, on March 16, 2018 with two HR specialist, one from a steel MNE (male, 30 years old) and the other from a chemistry MNE (male, 30 years old). The workshop was also participated by two high-school students enrolled in a school-to-work transition programme with ADAPT.

The fourth workshop was conducted in Rome, on March 26, 2018. This involved an employer's representative from Assosistema, the national federation of companies that clean and wash reusable textile and medical devices (male, 35 years old) and a policy officer from FEMCA CISL – Federation of energy, fashion and chemistry (female, 30 years old).

The last workshop was held in Modena, on April 17, 2018. This involved an employer's representative from Confcooperative – Confederation of Italian cooperatives (male, 32 years old) and a policy officer from FIRST-CISL - Italian Federation of Tertiary Services Networks (50 years old).

We also conducted 4 semi-structured interviews with the following persons:

- 2 trade unions officials from one of the main trade unions federations in the metalworking industry in Italy. The first one (female, 45 years old) is responsible for companies based in Lazio region. The second one (female, 30 years old) works at the collective bargaining department of Lombardy region.

- 1 official from the lead employers' association for the Modern Retail sector in Italy, working at the national department for labour policies and welfare (male, 35 years old).
- 1 official from the main employers' association of agricultural companies (male, 32 years old).

The following information reflect both the contents of the background interviews and the workshops.

## Overall results of thematic analysis and their link to ASPIRE research questions

How do different industrial relations (IR) structures facilitate and/or inhibit the dissemination and implementation of collective agreements on active ageing?

- Cooperative institutions, such as bilateral bodies consisting of workers' and employers' representatives, are crucial to shape active ageing through industrial relations.
- Integrative bargaining is better than distributive bargaining to shape active ageing policies.
- There should be a combination of bargaining levels that deal with active ageing, in tandem with public policies.
- Sometimes collective bargaining can create age cleavages in working regulation.

How are age and employment perceived in workplace contexts within different IR systems?

- Sectoral differences are important to shape appropriate active ageing policies. Therefore, sectoral funds, sectoral bargaining and especially firm level bargaining are important channels to deal with active ageing.
- Firm size is another aspect that shapes industrial relations capacity to deal with ageing challenges. In SMEs HRM and informality prevail over industrial relations and more structured processes.
- Cooperation is a key factor to shape active ageing through industrial relations. In contexts where the climate of industrial relations is conflictual HRM and efficiency pressures prevail over sustainability.

## How do employers and trade unions respond to EU and national social activation policies in creating sustainable work opportunities for older workers?

- They mainly respond with Intergenerational Solidarity Pacts negotiated at sectoral level and implemented via firm-level bargaining.
- Early retirement is still the main channel to deal with an ageing workforce.
- Many institutions and regulations, for example healthcare funds, are not agedbased but can still be used for active ageing goals.

## How are the interests of older and younger workers negotiated and reconciled through workplace level mechanisms?

- Intergenerational relay mechanisms are the main negotiated channels for active ageing. Older workers contracts are turned into part-time jobs and young people are hired.
- Apprenticeships, which in Italy are regulated via collective bargaining, are good schemes to promote older workers mentoring and cooperation with young people.
- Mentoring and reverse mentoring stands out among the most used crossgenerational programmes.

## How are good practice and innovations in the dissemination of active ageing approaches shared between and within different national contexts and in Europe?

- There are no institutional channels to share good practice and innovations in the dissemination of active ageing approaches in Italy.

## Common views, positions and practices of social partnerships on active ageing

Many people interviewed and involved in the workshop looked generally enthusiastic about active ageing. Others were less confident and somehow uncertain about existing active ageing policies. The overall impression was that, although the promotion of active ageing is not among the priorities of social partners in Italy, the issue is starting to be considered following some pressures from their members (both workers and companies). This is in line with the traditional Italian logic of collective action according to which trade unions and employers' associations strategies are shaped and influenced by

problems emerging at the shop floor. Social partners recognise that active aging is an issue of considerable concern, but it needs time to go on top of their agendas. This is also why active ageing measures in collective agreements are still scarce.

Social partners generally agree that “sustainability” is the keyword to approach the issue: this means to keep older workers productive and to allow them to respond to the increasing work-life balance demands. In this connection, the industrial relations approach is generally perceived as a better way to reconcile decent work with productivity. However, there is still a large gap between words and deeds, and opinions and reality of active ageing are often oceans apart.

### The idea of “active ageing” and its definition

Some interviewees and participants to the workshops tried to elaborate their own definition of what active ageing is. They are not aware of technical definitions or of the debate in literature, but their arguments sound generally reasonable and sharp. The majority of them simply have in mind the idea that the working population is ageing, workers will stay longer at work, and these trends necessitate specific responses to manage the related challenges and take the opportunities.

Particularly in the pilot workshop, participants stressed the importance to contextualize active ageing within a wider conceptual framework to understand and manage changes in society, economy and the labour market as a whole. The discussion involved the theoretical foundations of contemporary society and capitalism. Problems linked to active ageing must be addressed in a broader discourse of a new social contract that fits for all. They also highlighted the importance to understand active ageing as a life-long learning process as well the centrality of occupational welfare and related measures.

Those with more expertise and knowledge on ageing issues argued that work could represent an opportunity to overcome the stereotype according to which older people are seen as a burden for the society. Considering that retirement is not the end of active life, work would certainly help older people’s psychological well-being. Keeping a large part of Italian population active in social, political and cultural participation would have good implications for wider society.

One participant to one workshop observed that

«the concept of “active ageing” does not include the specification “at work”. Active ageing is not only about work. Therefore, active ageing policies should not

be focussed on work only. Active ageing is also about keeping active older workers that have abandoned the labour market. Active ageing beyond work is related to the importance and the role of older people in the society and it has important consequences, particularly regarding social services».

According to an employers' representative,

«the point is to implement active ageing policies at 360 degrees as active ageing does not regard only the traditional employment contract, but it refers also to other aspects, for example, volunteering. It is important to keep older people active in the society».

Another employers' representative argued that active ageing is not only about preventing early retirement of those older workers that are already in employment but also about effective outplacement policies for those workers that at the age of 62 or 63 need to find a new occupation as they have exit from the labour market.

An HR specialist argued that active ageing in his company is identified as a process in which over 55 workers transfer their know-how to younger workers. Knowledge is transferred in a strategic and structured way thanks to which transition from older workers retirement to young workers entry is not traumatic. This allows a dynamic management of working relationships.

One trade unions' representative observed that there are two typologies of “active ageing at work” policies: those which support older workers in the transition to early retirement in order to promote the intergenerational exchange and those active policies at work aiming at promoting an adequate permanence of older workers in their job position. According to another workers' representative, there is not only one concept of active ageing as there are three different typologies of age: biological age, functional age and perceived age. Functional and perceived age depends on the type of work, for example, even if 40 years old is not a biological age that could be considered as part of active ageing, for example in the case of teachers it could be necessary to put in practice adaptation measures at the workplace.

Finally, apart from few cases, social partners seem to be generally unaware of technical aspects related to statutory legislation (e.g. some contractual schemes, incentives etc.) potentially useful to support active ageing policies.

## Sectoral differences

There is consensus that the industrial relations approach is appropriate to better reflect sectoral differences. Challenges (and opportunities) of an ageing workforce change from sector to sector, thus national collective labour agreements (NCLAs) concluded at sectoral level and other sectoral institution (e.g. bilateral bodies) are the best environment to approach active ageing, along with firm-level bargaining. Population ageing is perceived differently in different productive sectors and the implementation of active ageing measures varies depending on their peculiarities. For example, even if part-time could be considered as an active ageing measure, in those sectors where this is practiced ordinarily, such as the tourism and the cleaning sector, it would be necessary to find other instruments to support older workers in work-to-retirement transition that do not add further burdens to the company. Also, vocational training has different implications depending on the sector. For example, sectors with a low added value hardly offer training measures that increase the efficiency of the worker, the elders in particular. Moreover, if the worker has already exit the labour market their outplacement will be even more difficult.

Also, ageing is less relevant in sectors where the age average is low. One employers' representative argued that in his sector as the age average is between thirty and forty years old and there are few workers with more than sixty. In other sectors, such as the chemical one, the age average is between thirty-five and fifty-five and there are important differences depending on the professional qualification.

A workshop participant said that in the agriculture sector there is a problem of intergenerational exchange as the age average of workers is growing. In tourism sector, an employers' representative argued that workers do heavy and repetitive tasks and challenging schedules with shifts starting early in the morning. This typology of working conditions affects particularly older workers. In the retail sector, ageing problems affect older women that work as supermarket cashier. The dimensions of supermarket cash are being reduced and this represent a problem for workers with overweight problems, particularly, older women. The banking sector, in turn, is being particularly affected by digitalization that implies bank's restructuration and a higher number of redundancies. This phenomenon has been historically managed (in the last 15 year) by facilitation the access to early retirement though sectorial funds, entirely funded by the companies of the sector.

## Limits of traditional industrial relations approaches and practices

Although all the interviewees and participants to the workshops agree that social dialogue and collective bargaining are important to cope with the challenges of an ageing workforce, they also argue on the difficulty to turn these approaches into reality. This is due to several reasons. First, despite the rhetoric on cooperation and collaboration, the climate of industrial relations in Italy remains conflictual. Second, active ageing never goes on top of social dialogue agenda: it remains secondary and other priorities stand above. Third, challenges and opportunities of active ageing are hardly treated as such: in most cases “age” is a transversal factor that influences different measures and policies both in HRM and industrial relations practices. Against this background, guidelines on active ageing negotiated by the European social partners are hard to implement, especially for small companies.

Participants to the workshops identify best practices as those where the management is more sensitive to the issue, due to its link to labour cost and productivity, and it tries to turn the related challenges into opportunities, with a long-term perspective. However, in these cases responses to an ageing workforce tend to be managed unilaterally. Trade unions are not marginalised: they are simply concentrated on other priorities.

Representatives of trade unions and employers also agree that union responses to active ageing depend on their power, which is largely conditional to their (declining) representative status. Also, when it comes to unions power, companies size matters, as the divide between SMEs and big companies affect trade unions representativeness and their logic of collective action. Small companies are difficult to unionize and HRM prevails over industrial relations. Many trade unions rights and prerogatives do not apply in companies with less than 15 employees. For SMEs in general, national sectoral collective agreements are the most important source of regulation that combines workers’ and firms’ needs. In bigger companies, firm level bargaining is a further channel for trade unions involvement in active ageing policies, although this remains an exception in the Italian industrial relations landscape.

For active ageing policies to be efficient, social partners agree that an important factor is the worker attitude to change. One participant to the workshop argued that

«Public policies and social partners’ responses to an ageing workforce necessitate a proactive role of workers and their willingness to “activate” themselves. This aspect is relevant not only for older workers, but for all the age groups».

## Active ageing requires a new approach to industrial relations

For both trade unions and employers, a case-by-case strategy is preferred, along with an approach to active ageing that takes into account the overall conditions of the workforce and the single worker, irrespective of their nominal age. For example, there is consensus that training and lifelong learning programmes are positive instrument for active ageing, provided that they are focused on the need of the single workers or groups of them. However, due to cost and efficiency pressures, training courses are often general and impersonal: companies tend to involve as many workers as possible in training course. Some participants to the workshops agree that for older workers the biggest challenge is to “learn to unlearn”. This means that it is much more difficult to train over 50 workers as they have 20-30 years of experience and change their behaviours is tough.

Regarding pensions, a trade union representative was clear that:

«sometimes it is better to retire earlier, sometimes it is better to stay at work longer. Our position should reflect the conditions and interests of the single worker».

This differentiate attitude is somehow ground-breaking in relation to traditional (classoriented) trade unions strategies, which tended to see the workforce as a uniformed group. For employers, this diverse union mindset parallels with an evolution of HRM towards diversification, especially in big companies. In this respect too, the shift from a classoriented logic of union action to a mindset that sees the worker as a person becomes crucial to create partnership with trade unions.

Similarly, this argument was also discussed in relation to working time flexibility. Working time flexibility, in general, is often regulated collectively, but sometime this is seen as a limit if individual adjustments are not allowed. An HR specialist observed that

«effective working time policies should be tailored on the single worker. Otherwise workers simply don’t use it. Blue collars, for example, get used to their time shifts and hardly use working time flexibility. On the other hand, in the production line entrance-exit flexibility is not always possible to implement, as shifts are sequentially organised among teams of workers».

Part-time work could be considered as an active ageing measure but sometimes is not economically convenient, both for the employer as money saving respect to full-time contract is not very high, both for the employee because salary is reduced and most of the times it is necessary to find another occupation.

Social partners further agree on the fact that active ageing policies should consider the ecosystem in which the company operations are based, as well as the distance for the commuting:

«if the company is based in a big city, and the worker lives by the company premises, he/she would probably prefer to go to the office, instead of staying at home. Work from home generates loneliness and exclusion, especially for older workers».

### Bilateralism as the preferred channel for partnership on active ageing

Sectoral bilateral bodies are the main result of cooperative industrial relations in Italy under which active ageing policies can be better understood, justified and managed. Training funds, integrative pension schemes and healthcare funds are positive examples of how social partners can create an ecosystem of resources and services to respond to an ageing workforce. However, these instruments are transversal: it is up to the single companies, their workers' representatives and the workers to activate those instruments to deal with age-related problems. In this respect, a trade unions officer was clear that:

«trade unions have a key role in convincing the management and the works councils to apply statutory legislation, collective agreements and bilateral funds in a way that serves to manage ageing problems».

In many contexts partnership between employers' associations and trade unions are consolidated, and bilateral projects are implemented, also beyond traditional conflict-driven negotiations aimed at resolving diverse labour market interests. However, these programmes hardly fit within the policy narrative of active ageing. For example: parttime regulation in many sectors is the result of joint agreements between social partners representing both side of the industry. The same goes for health insurance policies defined bilaterally. Nonetheless, these actions are not negotiated within the active ageing policy framework. Their justification and articulation respond to other reasons (e.g. contrasting welfare state retrenchment, redistribution, increasing working time flexibility etc.), although indirectly they can be regarded as “active ageing measures”.

According to the interviewees, complementary or voluntary healthcare insurance is one of older workers' main needs because, generally, ageing involves health problems and older workers use an important amount of their salary for healthcare. Therefore, sector health bilateral funds represent an important instrument to protect workers' buying power also because they can be extended to workers' family. An employers' representative pointed out that

«the sustainability of sector health funds in those sectors where the age average is high could be at risk as there are a high demand of healthcare. Also, welfare measures contained in collective agreements are put at risk by an ageing population».

In a similar vein, bilateral bodies in many industries have set up pension funds to complement public pension schemes, as well as training funds. In addition, the most important national sectoral collective agreements introduced specific provisions for workers affected by chronic diseases, including specific forms of part-time work, hourly and daily leaves for medical care, job rotation programmes, more sustainable shifts and so forth. Although these provisions are not age limited, it is more likely that older workers use them. In any case, these instruments are not necessarily associated to active ageing policies. A policy officer from an employers' association in the tourism and catering industry was clear that:

“our association doesn't have a full awareness that single policies on working time flexibility or health insurance can be associated to a broader active ageing policy».

The same employers' representative came up with the idea to create a system of incentives to link the abovementioned measures to active ageing. The idea is that those companies that use resources and services stemming from bilateral funds, with the specific aim to implement active ageing policies, should be entitled with an economic or normative incentive, such as additional working hours of training covered by the fund, or more working time flexibility to manage the older workers enrolled in the active ageing policy.

### The role of public institutions

Both employers and unions stressed the importance of state support to implement active ageing policies, especially when their economic and occupational impact is significant. Population aging is an issue that do not concern only social partners: legislation is central because social partners do not have the possibility to implement alone active ageing policies in collective agreements, and many aspects exceed their bargaining competence. According to an employers' representative,

«a public system of welfare that implement active labour market policies, both regarding outplacement and vocational training, is necessary to guarantee the inclusion of older workers in the labour market».

A good practice was reported regarding a company based in Nuoro. Once the public fund to support working time reduction to tackle the economic crisis finished, a group of workers aged around 55 became redundant. In order to avoid their collective dismissal, their company, trade unions and local institutions came up with the idea to reemploy the redundant workers in social utility activities related to the conservation and care of the urban commons and the community. A trade unions' representative observed that this solution:

«allowed workers to feel active and to be useful for the community and the territory».

## The position of employers' associations and HR managers

Employers' associations take a bottom-up approach to active ageing. They mainly act in response to companies' requests. They mainly play a consultancy role for their members. Their labour law and industrial relations departments – which normally carry out consultancy activities toward their members – are competent on active ageing. Active ageing is a priority for the employers' federations to the extent that it is a priority for their members. An interviewee stated that:

«we believe this is a critical issue for our members and its relevance will increase in the next few years. Skills shortages coupled with ageing workforce put pressure on our members, thus retaining older workers, ensuring their sustainability, and allowing them to transfer value to new generation of workers become priorities».

## Ageing workforce, labour productivity and skills retention

Due to the increase in retirement age, little discussion has started within companies, and this was also prompted by the economic crisis. Companies have found problems in managing older workers at work, and the only practical way was that of promoting workers exit from the labour market through (early) retirement.

An HR specialist argued that in his steel company active ageing is an issue because the working population is aging rapidly, particularly, in the most important parts of the production cycle. The company now wants to focus on active ageing as it affects labour productivity. Similarly, an HR specialist of a chemical company highlighted that in his case the topic of active ageing is related to labour productivity: the more workers get older, the more their performance reduces. From an HR management perspective, active ageing

should primarily consist in ensuring that the aging of working population does not lead to a decrease in productivity or to an increase in labour costs related to absenteeism due to health problems, replacement costs and so forth that is not compensated by productivity growth.

In general, the approach of employers to active ageing tends to strike a balance between sustainability and productivity of an ageing workforce. According to an interviewee, the policy rationale is

«to combine the needs of older workers, in terms of work-life-balance, health and safety and motivation, with the need of the companies to keep workers productive».

These aspects are seen as two sides of a same coin in principle. However, in some contexts is much more difficult to combine them because short-termism tends to prevail in HRM. Workers wellbeing, in general, is considered as a cost: the return in terms of productivity is not immediate. Active ageing, in contrast, necessitates investment and a long-term perspective: this is the high-road to productivity.

On the other hand, firms look interested in extending working age because older workers have skills that are not available in the labour market and that cannot be developed within the organization in a short time. In this connection, an HR manager argued that in his company

«there is an “alarm”, a fear that older people can access to early retirement because their professionalism is hardly replaceable».

### From HRM, to industrial relations

Taken these considerations together, the industrial relations approach is perceived as a better way to reconcile sustainability with productivity. One employers' representative stressed the importance that

«trade unions have a collaborative and proactive approach to this topic and not a conflictual one. If trade unions are keen to collaborate on active ageing policies their support becomes fundamental, as they better know the needs of the workforce».

A company's firm-level agreement, which was agreed by management and workers' representatives, establishes a so-called positive action committee which is tasked with proposing initiatives and solutions for promoting diversity and inclusion, also through a company project called 'inclusion and diversity', and monitoring the actions of the company's active ageing project designed to support the activities and the potential of employees over the age of 55. This was reported as a good example of how cooperative industrial relations can result in good measures to promote active ageing at company level.

Collective bargaining is also fundamental when it comes to implement some normative provisions to promote active ageing or intergenerational relay schemes. However, both companies and workers' representatives are rather sceptical on this issue, as that kind of measures implicates an added cost for companies or a reduced net income for workers.

Nowadays, the majority of the companies, with some exceptions already mentioned, prefer to facilitate early retirement for older workers. An employers' representative was clear that,

«if legislation allows early retirement, companies will prefer to favour the exit of older workers that represent an important burden from the economic point of view, and hiring young workers by using economic incentives, without taking into the consideration the problem of welfare systems' sustainability and the high-road to active ageing».

Beyond collective bargaining, bilateral bodies are also mentioned as a source of regulation and financing of active ageing policies. Training, income support in case of working time reduction or any kind of welfare measure directed to older workers can be potentially covered by bilateral bodies. However, in most cases such opportunities are unknown: the divide between big and small companies is mentioned in this respect, too.

Company responses to ageing workplaces are generally the result of broader HRM or industrial relations policies that are not necessarily focused on older workers. Working time flexibility is an example: reduction of working hours is generally regulated for the whole workforce, or in relation to specific companies or workers' needs that are not directly linked to age. Ergonomics and health and safety improvements are other examples. The same goes for training measures. Specific age-based policies are concerned with compensation and benefits: age is actually a variable that influences labour cost management.

## The divide between SMEs and large firms

This argument refers to both large and small companies. In sectors where small companies prevail, the management or the owner are the oldest persons in the production/service cycle, and they perform the same tasks of their younger employees: they are often involved in the same working teams together with young workers, and managerial activities tend to overlap with daily, ordinary working tasks. This facilitates knowledge and skill transfer, on the one hand, especially in family companies, where solidarity among the firm community is higher. On the other hand, this also results in informality in employee relations, and can bring for example the owner to underestimate the importance of formal training courses to improve his/her expertise or the one of his/her employees. In this regard, an employers' representative said that

«informality and the mantra of emergency are cultural challenges that employers' associations try to overcome by educating their members to *look forward*».

Employers' associations agree that there is a divide between bigger and smaller companies. Big companies tend to address the problem of an ageing workforce as a priority. SMEs are less attentive on this issue. On the other hand, big companies are also those where more structured MRM departments exist: they tend to involve the federation in case of very technical issues, mainly concerned with the interpretation of normative provisions, or when there is a specific need to be addressed to public institutions. Moreover, MNEs are those where HRM takes place in a cultural environment most favourable to concentrate on active ageing. An interviewee referred to German companies operating in Italy as a good example in this respect.

When it comes to age-based statutory legislation and schemes, companies argue that they are hard to implement, due to technicalities and red tape. Employers' representatives, however, are clear that lack of knowledge and expertise often influence such perception. In fact, companies are not always aware of the normative provisions and how to use them properly. The most cited example are the incentives to early retirement, that is also the most used scheme, especially in bigger companies. Recent reforms of the civil code allow for more possibilities for job rotation and workers moves (both horizontally and vertically). In this case, the divide between large and small companies is twofold: on the one hand, small companies underestimate this change, because the same flexibility was used before in informal ways; bigger companies still think that using this kind of job flexibility is risky, in terms of possible litigation with workers, especially the elders, as they are reluctant to downgrading or wage reductions. Workers moves within intra-firm occupations is also hard to implement, mainly because positions that suit for older workers are simply not available.

## The position of trade unions

Trade unions see themselves as key stakeholders for efficient and sustainable active ageing policies. On the one hand, they see themselves as a channel voice to drive workers' needs which they are supposed to know well. On the other hand, some normative schemes to manage older workers require collective agreements to be implemented. Partnership with trade unions is therefore voluntary, but it becomes compulsory if companies want to activate some normative provisions that necessitate an agreement with workers' representatives.

Trade unions are clear that active ageing should be addressed bilaterally. This is because active ageing is an issue of common concern for both employers and workers. Sustainability is the keyword to approach the issue: this means to keep older workers productive and to allow them to respond to the increasing work-life balance demands. Nonetheless, trade unions are also clear that active ageing is not a priority for trade unions so far. They are vocal against the Government when it comes to pension reforms; but active ageing policies are hardly settled and implemented. At confederation level, active ageing is considered as a future priority for trade unions. At the shop floor, unions agents or workers representatives often are not aware of challenges and opportunities of an ageing workforce, or they tend to see them as secondary.

## From HRM to partnership and collective bargaining

According to trade unions, what emerge is that companies, especially the big ones, tend to address the issue of active ageing unilaterally. This is unfortunate because managing the issue at company level, or without trade unions coordination, risks create dualism in the labour market. Indeed, unions argue that just the most profitable and structured companies are keen to invest on active ageing, while on average firms are too much concerned on labour cost and short-term management of older workers' problems. This problem is likely to intensify in the metalworking industry because of technological change. The opinion on this aspect is twofold: on the one hand, automatization makes production more sustainable for workers as employees, including older workers, are less and less requested to carry out heavy activities; on the other hand, job polarisation and skill changes risk to penalise older workers. Risks seems to prevail over opportunities. Thus trade unions should act in order to ameliorate and mitigate the technological effect on the older workforce.

In terms of levels of collective action, an interviewee argued that multi-employer bargaining is essential to give universality to the agreed measures. Accordingly, a trade unionist stated that

«the national collective labour agreement (NCLA) should be the most important level of negotiation on active ageing».

Unions argue that a combination of bargaining levels is important to deal with an ageing workforce: resources and institutions should be agreed at a national level; then the local level of negotiation should implement and modulate them. In this connection, some trade unions' representatives gave a positive evaluation of some economic incentives that the law recognises in favour of work-life balance measures agreed in firm-level collective agreements. These measures should be spent also to fund programmes focused on older workers. Training programmes, mentoring actions and working-time organisation are key elements that should be negotiated by social partners.

### Unions attitude and priorities to contrast ageing challenges

Unions are generally working to implement legislation that allows active ageing policies as it is positive both for workers and for the company for different reasons. On the one hand, believe that if a worker has been working in a company for a long time, the employer has done an investment on that person and it should be interested in extending the duration of the employment relationship. On the other hand, they also argue that

«companies are more interested in hiring young workers as it is more economically convenient and also because those workers are more flexible from at physical and mental level. For that reasons, companies are more interested in promoting the access to early retirement than measures to keep older workers active at work».

Overall, trade unions responses to an ageing workforce are generally focused on working time flexibility. Part-time, smart-working, tele-work and other forms of work-life-balance are important aspects of trade unions perspective on active ageing. They argue that these kinds of measures are generally hard to implement do to their costs, even where they are regulated by NCLAs. In companies where these policies are implemented for the overall workforce, trade unions are vocal to give priority to older workers.

Smart working, which is mainly regulated via collective agreements, has been mentioned as an instrument to respond to physical mobility challenges due to personal or infrastructural barriers. However, a workers' representative stressed the importance that

«smart working is not only about working anywhere with a computer. It should imply a change of mindset on how work is organised».

Attitude of trade unions on pension policies is diverse and largely depends on the types of jobs involved. They argue that extension of retirement age is unsustainable for certain heavy occupations. Therefore, they ask for the activation of early retirement schemes or job changes.

Beyond traditional industrial relations practices, a big share of trade unions membership in Italy is fuelled by retired workers. The three main union confederations have established a federation of pensioners with a longstanding tradition of activities related to fiscal administration, welfare measures, legal consultancy and other aspects related to citizen's needs. The same goes for the employers' side, in relations to small entrepreneurs in the retail, artisanal and agricultural sectors. The involvement of retired union members in consultancy, mentoring and counselling activities in favour of younger activists and workers is reported as a good practice. A trade unions' representative observed that the involvement of retired workers in these processes is important for three reasons: first, to "activate" them and to promote their inclusion; second, to make union consultancy services available for workers beyond working time; third, to promote knowledge transfer.

Some comments were also made on the wage structure and its rigidity. A provocative question was asked about the fairness of a wage system where older workers produce less and earn more while young workers produce more and earn less. The trade unions' representative said that this is largely a false problem: it is not necessarily true that older workers produce less and earn more. However, the interviewee also recognises the importance that wages should be based more on competences than on seniority.

## Intergenerational issues and ways to overcome them through social dialogue and collective bargaining

Intergenerational cleavage is one of the channels through which conflict among workers rises. From the workshops emerged that conflict between generations of workers depends on several factors. First, older workers propensity to absenteeism is often seen as a problem for young workers as they are requested to substitute the former, to increase their workload, or to adjust their tasks and shifts accordingly. Second, higher labour cost of the older workforce tends to have a negative impact on young people salary and career opportunities. Third, pension reforms have reduced the possibilities to hire young workers.

Fourth, older people have higher pensions in comparison to future pensions of new generations of workers. Sixth, young people are generally hired with non-standard employment contracts, thus they feel their condition more precarious than older workers. Seventh, in the context of performance evaluation the evaluators are generally older than the workers assessed.

On top of these aspects, social partners generally agree that older workers are one of the weakest segments of the population and they are particularly exposed to the risk of unemployment. An employer representative was clear that

«older workers (from 40 to 60 years old) are even weaker than young people that enter the labour market for the first time, as for the latter there are tax incentives for open-ended employment contracts, apprenticeship schemes, etc.».

When it comes to economic dismissals, older workers have more difficulties to find a new occupation sometimes because they are not interested in participating in vocational training activities. Those workers are in a “limbo”: near to the retirement age but have not reached yet the requirements to obtain retirement benefits. There is a gap between their previous job and the access to retirement benefits: without effective active labour market policies it would be very difficult for older workers in that situation to find a new job.

### The role of trade unions and collective bargaining

Participants to the workshops confirmed that social dialogue and collective bargaining hardly deal with these aspects directly. Indirectly, however, collective agreements affect cross-generational conflict as collective agreements regulate both wages and job classifications across sectors. The role of collective bargaining in fostering wage (in)equality depends on both the coverage and contents of collective agreements: in general, a high coverage of collective bargaining tends to be associated with higher wage equality, though the contents of collective agreements can also be a source of inequality when they determine divisions in the workforce they cover. Nonetheless, if it is true that collective bargaining does not always have a positive effect on wage inequalities based on age, it is also true that uncoordinated forms of single-employer bargaining or unilateral human resources policies are likely to lead to higher levels of age-based inequality.

There is a general consensus that collective bargaining’s capacity to redress age-based wage inequalities depends on the power of the actors involved in coordination. Wage increases deriving from sectoral collective bargaining renewals seem to have little effect on age-based inequality as they reflect the existing relative differences in wage groups

except when the various groups are covered by different collective agreements (e.g. in Italy executives are covered by different collective agreements in each sector). Senioritybased pay schemes, which are supposed to create age-based divisions, exist in all sectoral collective agreements in Italy, and they foster inequalities both within organisations and groups of workers.

In some cases, company-level bargaining determines a peculiar form of dualism in the labour market: frequently results-based bonuses do not apply to apprentices; the measures set down in the contract designed to limit labour costs (e.g. entry-level salary, pay freezes, the repeal of certain pay-related provisions) only apply to new staff who are usually classified as low-grade and medium-grade staff in the job classification system. Conversely, the diffusion of standardized results-based bonuses contributes to limiting age-based wage dispersion, both among companies and within the same firm.

For companies, intergenerational cooperation is often seen as a bottom-up process, and not the result of top-down policies. One employer's representative, for example, argued that

«tutoring and mentoring programmes take place spontaneously within team of workers where older and younger workers cooperate. Knowledge circulation is immanent in social relations in general».

On the other hand, it was pointed out that

«not always employee relations are based on cooperation, trust and solidarity: both older and young workers are often jealous of their skills, and unwilling to transfer them».

Therefore, a priority for social partners is to create the environmental condition to promote spontaneous forms of cooperation within the workforce that promotes knowledge transfer. The overall narrative of employers and their representatives is that trade unions can add a value in building solidarity among workers, provided that their approach is cooperative and collaborative too, and it goes beyond the traditional labour vs. management approach. Also, when it comes to redistributive logic of collective action, equity and fairness became crucial to build trust within the workforce, that might affect positively young-old workers cooperation.

## Sectoral differences

According to some participants to the workshops, the abovementioned aspects show different intensity across occupations and sectors:

«in capital intensive sectors technological change necessitates continuous skills update. Labour intensive activities are generally associated to lower skills and therefore workers are more substitutable. This impacts on older workers “obsolescence”».

Those seven aspects are also perceived differently between workers, across sectors. Creative and cognitive occupations are generally those were young people “make the difference” thanks to their fresh ideas and knowledge flowing from their studies. In this case, older workers feel youngsters as a threat. On the other hand, technical jobs are those were professionalism is synonymous of experience and seniority. In this case, newly employed young workers are hired in low-skilled positions and in the bottom levels of the job classification. As many occupations necessitate a long period of practice to be occupied, conflict between young and older workers hardly arises, and cooperation between different groups of workers is more likely to emerge.

### Channels and practices of active ageing regulation

Mentoring and reverse mentoring stands out among the most used cross-generational programmes. Some collective agreements mention these kind of measures, although their source of regulation remains unilateral HRM. Conversely, job sharing is completely neglected in both collective agreements and HRM practices. Another form of crossgenerational solidarity stems from apprenticeship schemes, which are regulated by sectoral collective agreements in Italy: although there a no formal provisions related to wage of the tutors enrolled in apprenticeship schemes, they generally have a longstanding experience in the qualification that the apprentice should acquire, thus the latter is generally younger than the former. The same goes for school-to-work transition schemes and any form of on-the-job training.

Almost all participants recalled the role of collective bargaining in regulating Intergenerational Solidarity Pacts, which have been signed in several sectors. This scheme is also promoted by the legislator and, in some sectors, is supported by bilateral funds established by social partners at sectoral level. Although the main purpose is that of raising youth employment, they also promote the involvement of older people, by creating a link between different generations, in terms of skill transfer and creation of job opportunities. Pursuant to such agreements, managers who are about to retire can convert their employment relationship into a part-time one and act as tutors for their newly employed younger colleagues or middle managers. However, as recalled earlier, these

agreements necessitate to be implemented via firm-level bargaining or HRM programmes, and few (big) companies in Italy have done so. Also, someone observed that they create a tension with the high road to active ageing, which is continuous training and retraining to fill the technological skills gap: the two processes – i.e. early retirement and working time reduction on the one hand, and requalification on the other – are often seen as alternative and in fact they are so. In this case, the real challenge is to make selective choices that fit on the needs of the single worker.

A further example of cross-generational solidarity flows from the national sectoral collective agreement (NCLA) of the banking sector. A provision of the NCLA renewed in 2015 invites the managerial staff to contribute 4% of their fixed salary to the F.O.C. (the National Employment Fund, set up in 2012 in order to create fruitful and stable employment by supporting the permanent employment of young people), to demonstrate solidarity between generations.

