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Differences between occupations with respect to exit from working life

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1. Introduction

There is in large parts of the world a demographic crisis. Due to the increase in life length and the drop in birth rates, prospects are that much fewer people of working age will be available in the future to support those in retirement.

Also Sweden faces a demographic challenge, implying that it will be necessary to make the Swedes work more years. There is an obvious potential in the age range 65-74 years, where the employment rate is a mere 15.3 percent, whereas it amounts to about 77 percent in the age range 55-64 years (Statistics Sweden 2013). The proposals under way focus on revising frameworks hampering working into old age, and creation of economic incentives for everyone to do so. In this discussion, the role of poor working conditions boosting premature retirement, is largely left aside. Nevertheless, it is well known that insufficient work ability in relation to work demands is a strong predictor for early exit from working life (e.g. Ilmarinen 2011). So the question arises, which ones are the occupational groups that exit working life early, and are working conditions likely to play a role?

2. Aim

The study aim was to analyse the impact of occupation on the exit from working life.

3. Method and material

The project was carried out as a population study employing methodology used in demographics to predict life length at birth, applied here to predict exit age from work. In demographics, the calculations are based on statistics showing the number of deaths in different age groups; here, calculations of expected remaining work life length were based on the outflow from working life. The question was addressed: "If you keep working in the same occupation from age 35 onwards, what is the likelihood that you will still be working at age 65?"

The study was based on the Swedish national labour statistics, covering all employees who had an occupational definition in 2006, and who were in the age range 35-64 years during the study period 2007-2010.

Occupations were classified according to the 3-digit Swedish Standard Classification of Occupations (SSYK), comprising 112 occupations. In the present analysis, we focus on the 30 largest occupational groups, for men and women.

4. Results

Tables 1 and 2 show percentages of male and female "survivors" (the ones still working at age 65 years), in those occupations showing the earliest exits from working life.

It is seen that the high risk tables contain blue collar occupations exclusively, and that "survivors" are a minority in these groups. As a contrast, occupations with the lowest risk of exiting early from working life include only white collar jobs (data not shown). For instance, the mean exit age exceeds 64.5 years in e.g. university teachers, economists, company managers, health care specialists and professionals in public service operations. In many of these occupations, the likelihood to still be working at age 65 exceeds 70 percent.

Comparing men and women in the entire set of data, we found that men exited later, but that the gender difference was only 0.02 years.

Table 1. Occupations with the highest risk of early exit from working life (men)

Occupation	Percentage “survivors”	Mean exit age (years)
Sales and services elementary occupations	29.2	59.5
Manufacturing labourers	35.9	62.1
Helpers and cleaners	38.9	62.1
Garbage collectors and related labourers	39.0	62.5

Table 2. Occupations with the highest risk of early exit from working life (women)

Occupation	Percentage “survivors”	Mean exit age (years)
Sales and services elementary occupations	27.6	58.7
Food and related products machine operators	37.8	62.1
Rubber- and plastic- products machine operators	39.4	62.3
Manufacturing labourers	39.5	62.0

5. Discussion and conclusion

The results show that there are large occupational groups that exit working life well before they reach 65 years of age. There is a socioeconomic divide between the behaviour of blue and white collars in this respect. The early exit jobs can to a large extent be characterized as involving high physical workload, repetitive work exposure and low formal requirements of education. Those are jobs that are known to result in high risk of job related health problems and long term sick leave.

It is useful to categorize older people approaching retirement age into those who can and want to; those who can, but do not want to; those who cannot, and do not want to; and those who cannot, but want to, continue working into older age (Nilsson et al. 2011). Creation of economic incentives only, may influence those who can, but presently do not want to continue working, but is not likely to affect performance in the other groups. The ones who can and want to continue to work probably do so anyway, and those who cannot continue working are stuck with their insufficient work ability, and are not likely to be able to benefit from the better pensions envisaged. And the Swedish Pension Commission noted (2012) that only about 20 per cent of the Swedish working population identify economics as the main reason why working.

The obvious conclusion is that in order to increase the number of working years in the Swedish labour market significantly, improving working conditions in the high risk groups will have to be addressed.

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