

Job satisfaction after the COVID-19 pandemic – did work disruptions matter?

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Abstract

Population ageing and workforce contraction highlight the importance of extending working lives, particularly among older workers. Job satisfaction is a key determinant of continued employment, yet its post-pandemic dynamics remain underexplored. Using Wave 9 of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (2021–2022), this study examines job satisfaction among workers aged 50+. Factor and cluster analyses identify four groups: physically tired (26.8%), unsatisfied (27.0%), discouraged (25.2%), and satisfied (20.9%). Multinomial logistic regression assesses the role of pandemic-related work disruptions and individual characteristics. Results show limited impact of COVID-19 disruptions on satisfaction, though working from home reduced physical strain. Higher education and perceived workplace safety strongly predict satisfaction, while older age increases the likelihood of discouragement. Country-level variation is substantial, explaining differences in employment rates among older workers. Findings underscore the need to improve job quality and recognition to support longer working lives in ageing societies.

Introduction

One of the key policy responses to population ageing and shrinking working-age population is the extension of working lives, especially among older workers. One of the important factors that affect longer working lives of people close to retirement age is their satisfaction from the current job. Satisfied workers tend to stay longer employed, while those that face more demanding work conditions, including heavy physical work, tend to retire earlier.

In this paper we analyse the work satisfaction of people aged 50 or over, after the COVID-19 pandemic, that was a major disruption for job performance among many Europeans. Based on the Wave 9 of Survey on Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe, conducted in between October 2021 and October 2022, we analyse how people are satisfied (or not) with their work, based on the set of questions related to job conditions in the survey. We compare the distribution of work satisfaction between countries. We also identify individual characteristics that are related to the job satisfaction, but also verify, to which extend work disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic are associated with the feeling of job satisfaction.

1. Literature findings

1.1. Definition of job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is one of the most frequently used indicators of well-being in the context of work. It allows for the assessment of what extends employees find their expectation fulfilled by their work (Rafferty & Griffin, 2009; Rozeman et al. 2022).

There are many definitions of job satisfaction, but most of them indicate in different ways that it can be defined as an emotional reaction to work. The most known definition is Locke (1976), who says that work/job satisfaction is “a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job” (Locke, 1976, p. 1300). In turn, Cranny (1992) points out that "job satisfaction is an affective (that is, emotional) reaction to a job that results from the incumbents/s comparison of actual outcomes with those that are desired (expected, deserved and son on) (Cranny et al., 1992, p.1). As Hulin and Judge (2003) and subsequent researchers note (Rafferty & Griffin, 2009; Visser et al., 2021), job satisfaction includes multidimensional psychological responses to one's job and there is both emotional/affective and cognitive element in that. This concept is therefore related to the concept of social attitudes, however, as researchers note, social attitudes are weak predictors of social behaviors but at the same time job attitudes are strongly related to relevant job behaviors (Judge & Klinger, 2020). The distinction between the affective and cognitive elements is important primarily from the point of view of measuring job satisfaction, because cognition does not depend on affective judgment (Zhu, 2012 p.295). From the perspective of cognition and cognitive elements, job satisfaction can be seen as an evaluation of working conditions, opportunities, and output, i.e. rational

evaluation of working conditions (Moorman, 1993). On the other hand, when we look at job satisfaction in affection-oriented perspective, it can be seen as the feelings and emotions of employees in working. It reflects well the definition of Weiss (2002) indicating that job satisfaction is an internal state, which was an affective evaluation on the job by liking or disliking and the degree.

Extensive literature on the subject indicates that job satisfaction is strongly related to subjective well-being and life satisfaction (Erdogan et al., 2012; Judge & Watanabe, 1993). The relationship can be described by three different models: spillover model (when job experience spill over onto life experience and vice versa), segmentation (when job and life experience are separated) and separation (looking for compensation of dissatisfying job by seeking fulfillment in nonwork life and vice versa (Judge & Klinger, 2020, p.404). As Judge and Klinger (2020) point out in their 2020 literature review, job satisfaction is also related to a number of work-related behaviors and attitudes, such as attendance at work and turnover. decisions, decisions to retire, psychological withdrawal behaviors, pro-union representation votes, prevent unionization activity, workplace incivility and job performance (Judge & Klinger, 2020, p. 406).

Different studies show that job satisfaction is a concept that is indicated by various facets (Judge et al. 2020). The most famous categorisation was developed by Smith et al. (1969) and indicates five main aspects of job satisfaction: pay, promotions, colleagues, supervision, and the work itself (Smith, Kendall, Hulin, 1969). Another three facets were added later by Locke (1976): recognition, working conditions, and company and management (Locke, 1976). However, this categorisation misses the affective aspect, which causes difficulties in operationalising the concept and affects the effectiveness of measurement (Weiss, 2002; Judge et al. 2020). Some scholars also note that the indicated facets should be considered in two dimensions: as extrinsic and intrinsic factors (Judge et al. 2020). There are numerous tools measuring job satisfaction. As Judge et al. (2020) point out, the most popular of them include the Job Descriptive Index (JDI; Smith et al., 1969) and the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ; Weiss, Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1967), and the job satisfaction scale by Brayfield and Rothe (1951). Some researchers note, however, that the available tools for measuring job satisfaction are incomplete because they do not sufficiently address the affective dimension of the concept (Judge et al. 2020).

1.2. Job satisfaction of older workers

The term “older worker” in studies on labour market usually refers to workers aged 50 or 55 and above (Kooij et al., 2007). This is due to the fact that in many countries this age range features a decline in the participation rate in the labour market (OECD, 2005). Keeping older people in the labour market and active policy in this area is becoming a priority for many countries due to demographic reasons (OECD, 2017). This change is also important from the perspective of employers. A larger number of older workers means the need to change human resources policies, design of workplace and work organizations (Boumans, et al. 2011)

Job satisfaction is a crucial factor for motivation related to staying longer on the labour market. Low reported job satisfaction is associated with a wide range of undesirable outcomes for both older workers and their employers (Visser et al. 2021 p.303). The most important of these outcomes is the tendency to retire earlier and low motivation to remain in the labour market even part-time. As research shows, the relationship between low job satisfaction and retirement intentions is strong. Low job satisfaction is a factor influencing early retirement and also influences turnover intentions (Zacher et al. 2017; Chen et al. 2011; Hanish&Hulin, 1991). Older employees with high work satisfaction are less likely to retire early and perceive their work as fulfilling (Zacher et al. p.2).

Early retirement intentions and turnover intentions are not the only results of low job satisfaction. As research shows, lower job satisfaction increased absence frequency and affects the frequency and length of sick leave (Ybema et al. 2010). It can also contribute to burnout and depression. From the employer's perspective, a practical result of low job satisfaction among older workers is the fact that although there is no direct relationship between job satisfaction and performance, it can be said that workers with low job satisfaction are more likely to have lower performance (Puvada&Rao, 2012).

It is also worth noting that the factors influencing work satisfaction are related to age and differ between older and younger employees. In the case of older employees, job security (Claes & van de Ven, 2008), meaningful content of the job (Lord, 2004) are more important than advancement opportunities (Mehrabian & Blum, 1996)

1.3. Job satisfaction of older workers during and after COVID-19 pandemic- review of existing research

Only a few studies exist on older workers and work satisfaction during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, they concern the situation of older workers in selected countries and refer to selected dimensions of work satisfaction. Research and analyses of a more cross-sectional nature indicate that older 50+ workers might even be more affected by the pandemic compared to younger workers because they are labelled as vulnerable and as being at risk in terms of Covid-19 (Ayalon et al., 2020, Bauer et al., 2021). The pandemic also contributed to worsening mental health (Abrams et al., 2021) and earlier voluntary or forced retirement, especially among people in poor health conditions (D'Angelo et al., 2024). At the same time, older workers adapted better to new working conditions, which results from better age-related self-regulation strategies (Kooij et al. 2020).

Based on research conducted in selected countries (Rozeman et al. 2020), it can be seen that the COVID-19 pandemic did not negatively affect the work satisfaction of older workers. Research and analyses conducted among older Slovenian workers allowed us to conclude that work satisfaction during COVID-19 was higher among Slovenian older workers than before the COVID pandemic. This is due to a number of factors such as greater work-life balance, more flexible working hours, higher level of self-regulation of work speed and enabling the flexible workspace. An important factor influencing work satisfaction was also the programs in force in companies in the context of active aging and a healthy lifestyle (Rozeman et al. 2022). Achatz and others reach similar conclusions, using

the example of Germany. They note that although the literature on the subject clearly states that work satisfaction decreases with age, during the COVID-19 pandemic a reverse trend can be observed - such a decline can be noticed in younger generations, among employees 18-25 years old (Achatz et al. 2023).

2. Data and Methods

In our analysis we focus on SHARE respondents, who were economically active in Wave 9 (2022), after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to group respondents according to their perception of job satisfaction, we use a set of variables that characterise their work condition, willingness to retire and assessment of individual health situation, based on the agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

- (Main) job physically demanding
- Time pressure due to a heavy workload in (main) job
- Little freedom to decide how I do my work in (main) job
- Poor prospects for (main) job advancement
- Poor (main) job security
- Opportunity to develop new skills in (main) job
- Receive support in difficult situations in (main) job
- Receive recognition for work in (main) job
- Salary or earnings are adequate in (main) job

The grouping is conducted by first performing a factor analysis using the variables listed above. Then, the identified factors, that represent majority of the variance of these variables, are used to perform the cluster analysis, that result in the grouping of the workers aged 50 or over into the four major categories, depending on their overall feeling of job satisfaction.

In the next step, we perform a multinomial logistic regression, that aims at identifying, to which extend exposure to the work disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e. shorter or longer working hours, working mainly from home) are associated with the perceived job satisfaction.

3. Results

3.1. Job satisfaction among older workers after the COVID-19 pandemic

The results of the cluster analysis allowed to identify four, more or less equal, groups of workers aged 50 or over:

- Those who feel tired physically (26.8%),

- Those who are not satisfied with their job (27.0%),
- Those who are discouraged at work (25.2%),
- Those who are satisfied with work (20.9%).

This reveals that around 80% of workers are not satisfied with their job, due to the different factors that comprise the overall perception of job satisfaction. The prevalence of various items related to job satisfaction is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Cluster analysis: clusters based on work satisfaction items and their characteristics

	tired physically	unsatisfied	discouraged	satisfied	total
(Main) job physically demanding	80.20	55.27	20.38	37.36	49.40
Time pressure due to a heavy workload in (main) job	87.80	39.33	82.80	93.55	74.64
Little freedom to decide how I do my work in (main) job	56.99	39.95	12.16	11.87	31.63
Poor prospects for (main) job advancement	67.63	74.09	54.16	45.04	61.25
Poor (main) job security	36.11	25.50	6.88	7.05	19.78
Opportunity to develop new skills in (main) job	72.87	34.06	75.24	88.10	66.16
Receive support in difficult situations in (main) job	87.80	39.33	82.80	93.55	74.64
Receive recognition for work in (main) job	85.79	26.69	91.08	97.78	73.66
Salary or earnings are adequate in (main) job	64.41	27.67	70.58	88.05	60.98

Source: Authors

Those who are *tired physically* face more frequently a job that is physically demanding, that put more time pressure due to heavy workload, leaving little freedom to deciding, how the job is performed, and with overall feeling of poor job security. At the same time, people in this group feel that they have more than average opportunities to develop new skills, they receive support in difficult situation and more than average receive recognition for their work.

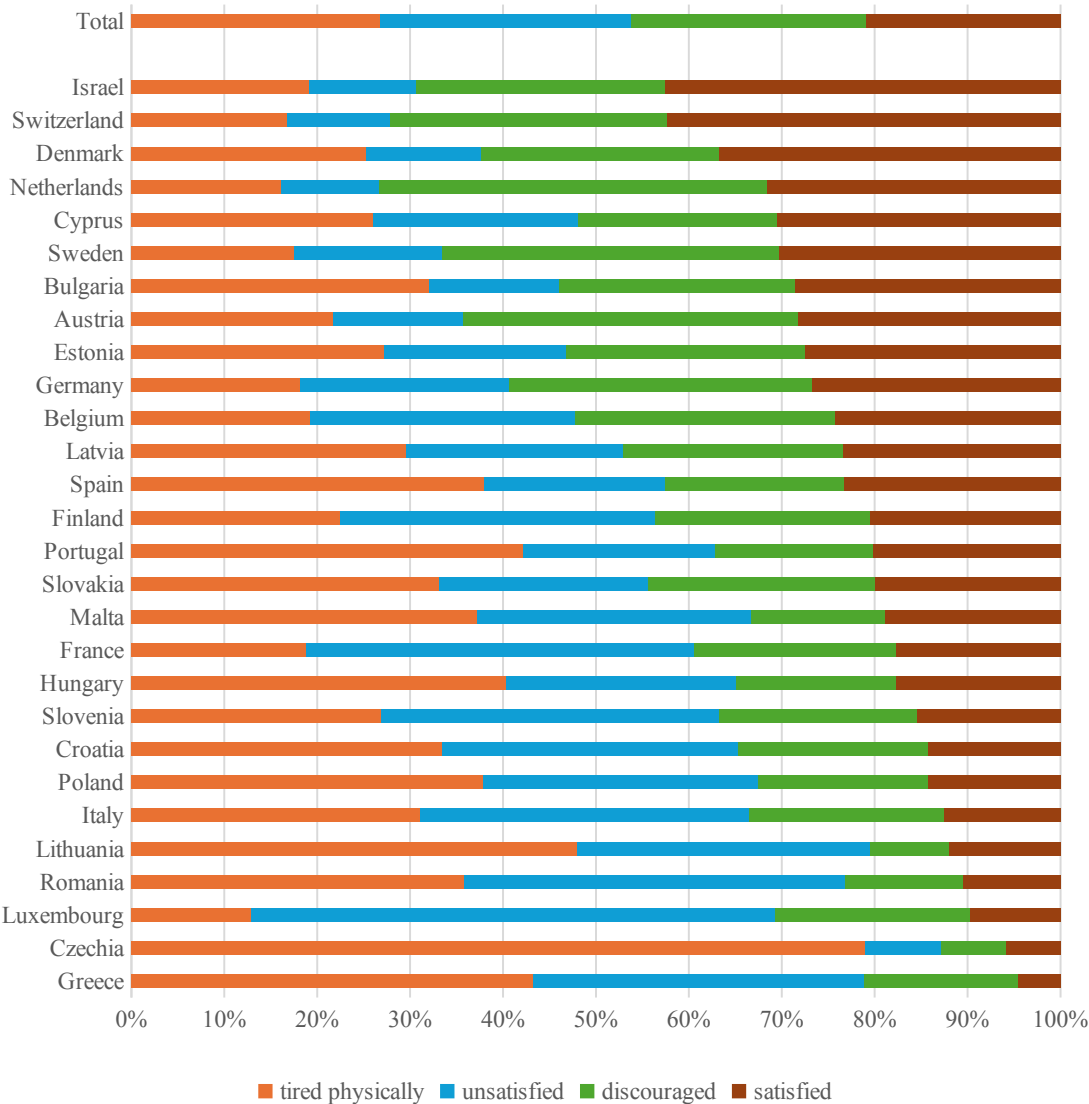
The second group can be assessed at those who are *unsatisfied* with their job situation. They have jobs that are associated with much lower time pressure than average, but at the same time with much poorer prospects of job advancement, and higher than average (but lower than among those tired physically) perception of job insecurity. This is a group that is particularly unsatisfied with factors related to their skills development and recognition. They rarely feel that they are provided with opportunities to develop new skills. They don't feel supported in case of facing difficult situation in job. They also feel not recognised for their work, and they feel that their salaries are not adequate.

Those that are *discouraged* face significantly more time pressure compared to the other groups, while the other factors associated with the job satisfaction are better than average.

Finally, people who are *satisfied*, are assessing their job situation better than average in almost all analysed factors, compared to all other groups as well as the average. The only outstanding factor is the perception of time pressure, which is experienced by the vast majority of people in this group, compared to the other groups as well as the average.

There are country differences with regards to the composition of workers by clusters. The share of those who are satisfied with their job is the highest in Israel, Switzerland and Denmark, while the lowest in Greece, Luxembourg and some of the Central and Eastern European countries (Czechia, Romania, Lithuania).

Figure 1. Distribution of clusters by country



Source: Authors

In order to identify, how individual characteristics are related to the assignment to the identified clusters, we performed a multinomial logistic regression, with individual variables such as: sex, age, educational attainment, household structure, as well as work-related characteristics including: working

from home, perception of safety at work, as well as working shorter or longer working hours during the COVID pandemic time (see Table A.1 in the Annex).

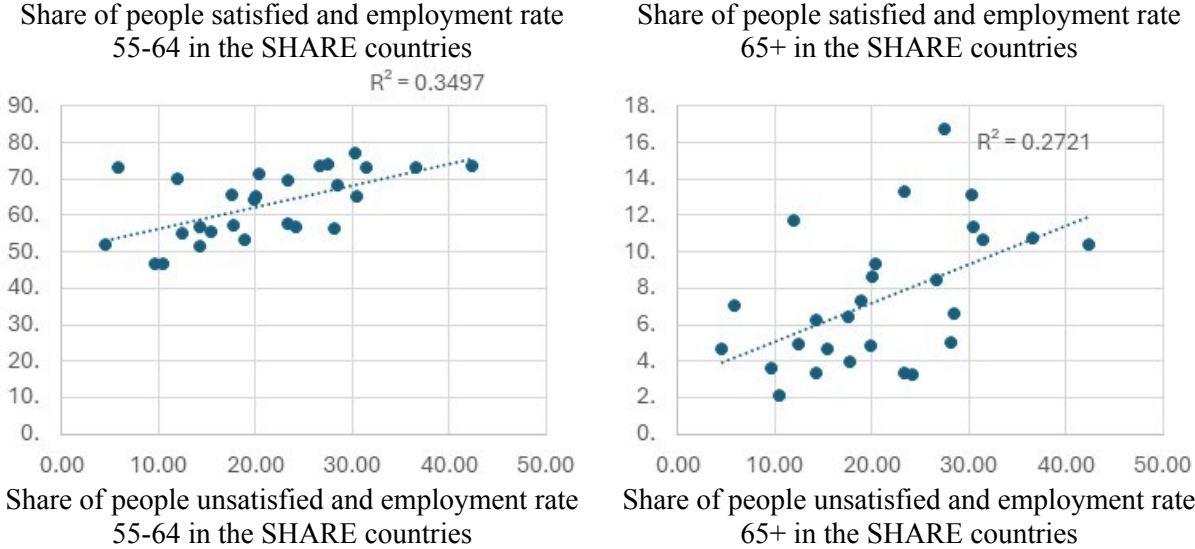
Our results show that compared to those who feel dissatisfied, women are less likely to feel discouraged at work. People, who remain at work above age 65 (in age groups 65-69 and 70-74), compared to those aged 50-54, are more likely to feel discouraged. Finally, compared to those with primary education, people with secondary and higher education are also more likely to be discouraged than dissatisfied.

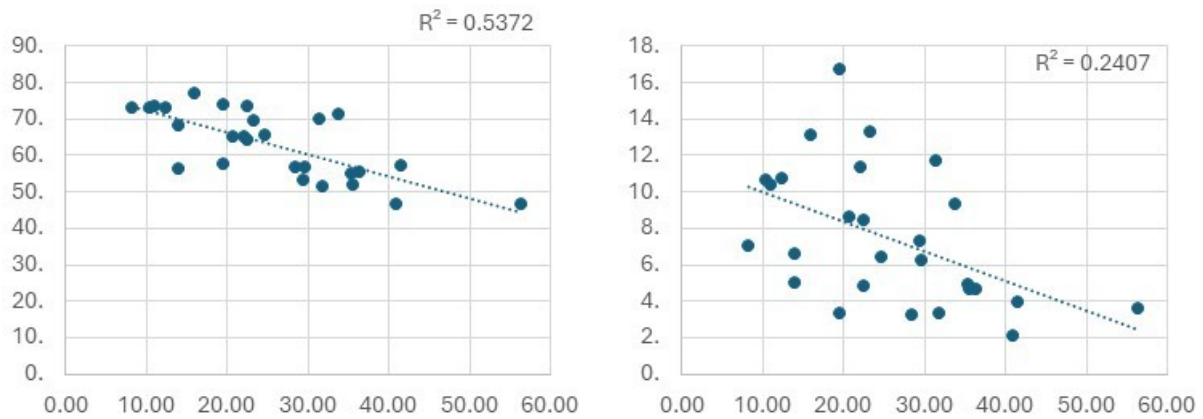
In the case of people feeling tired physically, we see that people who live in household with a partner are more likely to be tired than those who are single. Those who worked from home during the pandemic, were less likely to belong to the cluster of those tired physically.

Finally, people who are assigned to the cluster of satisfied with work are more likely to have higher education. Those, who did not feel safe at work were also less frequently assigned to the cluster of people satisfied with work.

Work satisfaction (unsatisfaction) is also associated with employment among older workers. As shown in Figure 2, higher work satisfaction is associated with higher employment rates among older workers. Assuming linear trend, work satisfaction explains around 34% of employment rate of workers 55-64, and at the same time work dissatisfaction explains more than 53% of the differences in employment rate among the SHARE countries. Similar tendency (but with lower value of R^2) are visible for employment rates among people 65+. These results show that reducing dissatisfaction and increasing satisfaction among older workers can contribute to potential increase of the employment rate among people in these age groups.

Figure 2. Work satisfaction and employment rate of older workers in SHARE countries in 2022





Source: Authors based on the cluster analysis and Eurostat LFS data (employment)

Conclusions

Many older Europeans are not fully satisfied with their work – either due to the physical constraints that they experience in their workplaces, or due to the lack of recognition of their work, or both. SHARE data reveals that these levels of satisfaction vary depending on the country, but also individual characteristics. In the post-COVID times, we can also see that the work disruptions during the pandemic did not have a major impact on the work satisfaction, however people who were able to work from home are less likely to be discouraged with their workplaces. Educational attainment and age are also important when looking into the work satisfaction.

Country differences in the level of unsatisfaction with jobs explain a large part of country differences in employment rates among older workers, less (but still quite a large part of variation) is explained by levels of job satisfaction. This indicates that one of the important areas of improvement to encourage longer working lives are the conditions of work and appreciation of older workers.

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Table A.1. Multinomial regression results: clusters participation

VARIABLES	(2) Unsatisfied (ref.)	(1) Tired physically	(3) Discouraged	(4) Satisfied
Women (ref. men)		-0.163 (0.204)	-0.397* (0.208)	-0.242 (0.260)
Age				
55-59 (ref 50-54)		-0.317 (0.400)	0.161 (0.415)	-0.249 (0.429)
60-64		-0.382 (0.396)	0.503 (0.430)	0.0119 (0.394)
65-69		-0.0800 (0.500)	1.308*** (0.475)	0.672 (0.455)
70-74		-0.437 (0.860)	1.987** (0.794)	1.286 (0.788)
75-79		-0.276 (1.025)	0.155 (0.973)	0.334 (0.948)
Education:				
Secondary (ref. primary)		-0.224 (0.263)	0.686** (0.321)	0.487 (0.400)
Higher		-0.138 (0.269)	1.267*** (0.336)	0.906** (0.395)
Household size				
2 people (ref. single)		0.710*** (0.272)	-0.115 (0.320)	-0.0227 (0.288)
3+ people		0.267 (0.296)	-0.245 (0.377)	-0.329 (0.366)
Worked from home		-0.519*** (0.199)	0.208 (0.225)	0.138 (0.217)
Don't feel safe at work		0.278 (0.240)	-0.364 (0.272)	-0.607** (0.287)
Shorter working hours		0.190 (0.277)	-0.0885 (0.299)	0.0329 (0.399)
Longer working hours		-0.223 (0.322)	-0.364 (0.299)	-0.186 (0.301)
Constant		0.127 (0.558)	-0.916 (0.618)	-0.535 (0.556)
Observations	4,858	4,858	4,858	4,858

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1