



DOI: 10.3189/2308-4081/2021-11(1)-4

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**THE MEANING OF WORK FOR THE ELDERLY
IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL CHANGES
IN THE EMPLOYMENT MARKET: POLISH DIMENSIONS**

ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, a time of dynamic civilisational, economic, technological and other changes, the approach to professional work, opportunities of employment as well as personal development and professional career is also changing. The transformation, the dynamic civilisation development, the globalisation and the so-called consumer revolution have significantly influenced the change in views on work and professional career. In this dynamics of transformations, older people, being retired, perceive both the changes and work in a slightly different way than young people entering the labour and employment market. This is due to their inclinations and features characteristic for their age and health condition. Besides, the functioning of seniors in the labour market is not easy in modern times. From the perspective of work in the 'volatile' employment market, it can be observed that, on the one hand, the duration of employment is getting shorter and shorter but in this short period of time, within a certain number of working hours, an employee has to 'deliver' as much as possible: ideas, initiatives and activities contributing to the development of the employing institution in order not to lose the already short period of employment and the possibility of adding new skills or achievements to the portfolio. Engaging older people in professional work, maintaining their activity in the labour market is possible with properly implemented social, economic, and educational policies with regard to older people. This paper focuses on the essence of work, its value and meaning for older people from the perspective of work activity and retirement experiences. It shows how work has shaped and continues to shape contemporary seniors and how they perceive themselves on the labour market and their own development opportunities.

Keywords: *older person, sense of meaning in life, values, work, professional growth, labour market, employment.*

АНОТАЦІЯ

У ХХІ столітті, в час динамічних цивілізаційних, економічних, технологічних та інших змін, змінюється також підхід до професійної діяльності, можливості працевлаштування, а також особистісного розвитку та професійного зростання. Трансформації, динамічний розвиток цивілізації, глобалізація та так звана споживча революція істотно вплинули на зміну поглядів на працю та професійну кар'єру. За таких динамічних трансформацій літні люди, перебуваючи на пенсії, сприймають зміни та працю децю інакше, ніж молодь, яка виходить на ринок праці. Це пояснюється їх нахилами та особливостями, характерними для їх віку та стану здоров'я. Крім того, діяльність людей похилого віку на ринку праці в наш час непроста. З точки зору зайнятості на «мінливому» ринку праці можна помітити,



що, з одного боку, тривалість зайнятості стає все коротшою, але за цей короткий проміжок часу, протягом сталої кількості робочих годин, працівник повинен «реалізувати» якомога більше ідей, ініціатив та заходів, що сприяють розвитку компанії (закладу) роботодавця, щоб не втратити і без того нетривале працевлаштування та можливість додати до портфоліо нові навички чи досягнення. Залучення літніх людей до професійної діяльності, збереження їхньої активності на ринку праці можливе при належній реалізації соціальної, економічної та освітньої політики щодо літніх людей. У статті зосереджено увагу на сутності праці, її цінності та сенсі для людей похилого віку з точки зору трудової діяльності та досвіду виходу на пенсію. Охарактеризовано процес формування людей похилого віку під впливом праці (в минулому і у сучасних умовах) та сприйняття ними самих себе на ринку праці й власних можливостей розвитку.

Ключові слова: літня людина, сутність сенсу життя, цінності, праця, професійне зростання, ринок праці, працевлаштування.

INTRODUCTION

Work is an important component of human life. Through occupational activity a person improves their personality, increases their social competences and develops in various areas of social functioning. Through occupational activity an individual satisfies their basic needs as well as those of a higher order. Work accompanies man for a considerable part of his life. However, its changing nature as a result of global civilisational transformations means that most people in the course of their working life will have to change employment multiple times moving from work to training and further training or voluntary and compulsory breaks in employment (Pikuła, 2014; 2015).

With regard to the conditions of social change, it can be noted that the way work is perceived has been changing over recent years. This is mainly influenced by the intertwining of complex change processes associated with the ubiquitous scientific and technological progress and globalisation. Considering the effects of the omnipresent social and civilisational progress, one can see that its consequences have their repercussions in relation to work. As Stefan M. Kwiatkowski (2001) notes, their impact on ‘the structure of employment as well as the nature of human work and the work environment’, is visible: ‘some jobs are completely eliminated, resulting in the need to change qualifications’ (p. 22). This means that the transformations of the modern world generate the appearance of new professions, jobs, new forms of employment, expectations from employees and new types of careers. More and more often, only people who are flexible and have a rich, constantly supplemented range of qualifications, competencies and professional skills, guaranteeing participation in many professional projects, in different teams, carrying out specific tasks in a set time, have a chance to get a job while people of retirement age or already retired have an increasingly rare chance to continue work (Pikuła, 2018).

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

This paper focuses on the importance of work in the perspective of the meaning of life among elderly people of retirement age in relation to the dynamics of social change and the resulting changes in the labour and employment market, which is the main academic purpose of the content presented herein.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODS

Modern labour market and the meaning of work

Work ‘may simply be a source of sustenance, but it may also be the most essential part of a person’s life, or it may be experienced as penance, as an unavoidable duty, or as a



development of universal human nature" (Mills, 1969, p. 359). As Mills (1969) notes, understanding work can be equivalent to accepting it as an external compulsion and is not a precondition for achieving full development; or it can be equivalent to a sense of satisfaction, or to accepting it as fulfilment, demonstrating the individual meaning of work. Work can thus be both a value considered higher than the other values, or its negation, something worthless due to uncertainty, low pay, and the risk of losing it at any time without explanation. It acquires particular importance for older people who are economically inactive, i.e. retired (Pikuła, 2017; 2018). As a matter of fact, work and the performing thereof is an important area of an individual's life activity. Both the everyday work that is not directly related to professional work and the work that retirees can undertake to satisfy their basic needs (including affiliation, usefulness, making life meaningful or economic security). Thus, work, especially in the eyes of older people, gives life a specific meaning and defines life's personal goals. Therefore, it constitutes, regardless of age, an extremely important element of the 'self-identification of the individual and the determination of their social position by others' (Szukalski, 2014, p. 11). By taking up paid work, an older person therefore experiences recognition resulting from the pursuit of their own interests, professional development, friendly interpersonal contacts or appropriately organised tasks to be performed. This, in turn, contributes to the achievement of satisfaction, the experience of the sense of hardship undertaken and fulfilment, and at the same time strengthens commitment to work (Łukasik, & Koćwin, 2013).

However, the functioning of seniors in the labour market is not easy in modern times. The transformation, the dynamic civilisation development, the globalisation and the so-called consumer revolution have significantly influenced the change in views on work and professional career, as well as the development of the 'poles of wealth and poverty' (Krzyszowski, 2010, p. 7). The adaptive model of work (stability of employment, one occupation at one place from starting work until retirement) along with the career associated with it has changed dramatically (Pikuła, 2017). This means that due to age and previous workplace experiences, an older person is oriented towards stability and adaptation, and finds it a little more difficult to take action for change, may not find their place in the labour market and consequently have a feeling of being useless and unnecessary. Unfortunately, modern times are characterised by the devaluation of the notion of "work" and "working time". These concepts "have been 'purged' of connotations and meanings that are antithetical relative to the discipline of capitalist labour. In the process of industrialisation, the cycles of work and rest that previously accompanied the nature and rhythms associated with their respective tasks achieve their own steady dynamics and gradually become indifferent to traditional contexts of meaning and importance" (Adam, 2009, p. 497). From the perspective of work in the 'volatile' employment market, it can be observed that, on the one hand, the duration of employment is getting shorter and shorter but in this short period of time, within a certain number of working hours, an employee has to 'deliver' as much as possible: ideas, initiatives and activities contributing to the development of the employing institution in order not to lose the already short period of employment and the possibility of adding new skills or achievements to the portfolio. One can talk about a certain paradox of work. On the one hand, the possibility of working, being employed in a particular place gives a person many opportunities for development, promotion and gaining new experiences; on the other hand, however, it deprives them of experiencing universal human values (trust, responsibility, dedication and the essence of work) and needs (of belonging, unconditional acceptance, full



development and freedom) (Pikuła, 2014; 2015). Hence, it is so difficult for older people to remain in the dynamically changing labour market and continue working beyond retirement age. This, in turn, translates into making life meaningful for older people through the prism of life achievements, especially professional work. In fact, making sense of life, reflecting on it, interpreting it, recalling one's own successes, achievements and failures, the balance of life is particularly characteristic of the period of old age and 'stems from one's system of personal meanings created around accepted values, goals and completed individual tasks' (Oleś, 2000, p. 228).

Old age is the stage of life when practically everyone asks themselves questions about the meaning of human existence. It is particularly often associated with the moment of retirement. Then a person begins a new stage of life, often a difficult period because it is equivalent to blocking the pursuit of the meaning of life. The difficulties that arise in finding a new role or a new activity commonly lead to a breakdown in the meaning of life. This is due to the fact that, as V. Frankl (1976, p. 76) emphasises, 'Man does not want to exist at all costs but what he really wants is to live with a meaning. What is important and decisive for existence is not its duration, but the fullness of its meaning'. This is why personal factors are so important in the experience of old age, including the sense of meaning in life, attitude towards old age and passing, experiences and health (Zych, 2009) manifested in various types of activity, especially professional.

The meaning of life can be pursued in many ways. For example, 'by perceiving cause and effect relations, existential experience, activity directed at meaning and value, subjective involvement in values, personal religious life, experiencing beauty, experiencing goodness, adopting a dignified, personal attitude and similar ways of subjective participation in life' (Popielski, 2007, p. 25). On many occasions, the loss of meaning or hope appears at the moment when an elderly person retires and ends the previous life activity. It is then that they most often experience abandonment and loneliness, lose the purpose of life which gives meaning to life. As Popielski (1993) notes, the problem with the meaning of life appears when 'there are no valuable goals, when they turned out to be unreliable, false, improperly set and groundlessly absolutised, when they become insufficient and lose their power of orientation, reference and attraction, and when they cease to motivate (pp. 189–190). And this happens when the older person loses contact with the workplace, the people in it and the tasks in which they used to engage. The lack of purpose and involvement in what keeps a person alive and makes their everyday life more meaningful, routine and repetitive busywork (Łukasik, 2014), can lead to a loss of meaning in life, mental disorders, etc. Therefore, it is so important to keep an elderly person active, wherein it is especially important to maintain activity relating to work.

Piotr Błędowski (2013) believes that despite numerous changes in the labour and employment market, it is possible to 'exploit the potential of seniors as active participants in economic life and maintain their presence in the labour market', which requires the accomplishment of several objectives:

- 1) 'preventing economic, digital and technological exclusion;
- 2) creating incentives for older people to remain in the labour market;
- 3) creating conditions for using the potential of older people as active participants in economic life and the labour market;
- 4) promoting the principles of corporate social responsibility and age management among employers;



5) promoting awareness of the principles of the silver economy among commercial and non-commercial actors' (p. 60).

Thus, engaging older people in professional work, maintaining their activity in the labour market is possible with properly implemented social, economic, and educational policies with regard to older people. The following part of the paper presents data from research confirming the value of work and the meaning it gives to older people as well as the possibilities of using the potential of older people in the labour market today, in the dynamically changing world.

Methodological assumptions of the study

This chapter presents excerpts from my research on older people's professional work in the perspective of the meaning and sense of work itself, as well as the development made possible through it. The research was conducted in a mixed quantitative-qualitative paradigm between 2016 and 2020. A total of 180 seniors living in Southern Poland participated in the study. The main methods of data collection used to conduct the study were survey and author's own tool in the form of a survey questionnaire and qualitative in-depth interview (Babbie, 2006). The main research question to which an answer was sought for the purpose of this paper was, 'What value and meaning do seniors give to their work?' Non-probabilistic (non-random) sampling was used in the research (ibid., p. 625). When selecting the group, the age classification proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO) was followed, and seniors aged 60 and over were invited to participate in the study.

RESULTS

Older people in relation to work and employment in the light of own research results

The description focuses on showing the general tendencies characteristic of the entire group of respondents with regard to the research question and the attempt to answer it.

Work as a value occupies a paramount place in the lives of older people (Pikuła, 2018). Thanks to work, the subjects satisfied and still satisfy not only the basic needs (material considerations), but they also could and still can satisfy educational, self-realisation, allocentric, pro-social and other needs.

Work during professional activity gave the seniors surveyed a guarantee of employment, stability of work and economic resources. It is defined by the respondents as a passion, mission, love of life, opportunity to achieve satisfaction and security. Performed with commitment, it provided opportunities for education, development, and establishing and maintaining friendship until the present moment. It helped shape personalities, traits and attitudes, including self-confidence, patience, meticulousness, independence and self-respect. If work evoked negative memories, these were due to the fact that it was a necessity, a burden, a duty, a cause of loss of health or neglect of the family (Pikuła, 2018).

Work in addition to retirement benefits has a different dimension for seniors; they define its value and meaning a little differently. Work is all activities – useful to society and family, undertaken also for the good functioning of the home, the family and themselves. They work to make life meaningful, to feel useful, meaningful and valuable. Work gives them pleasure, satisfaction, enables them to be active; thanks to involvement, they are motivated to live and life becomes meaningful (Pikuła, 2018). Work allows them to take care of themselves, serve others and act for their benefit (volunteering and social activities) and develop themselves. Thanks to work before reaching retirement age, respondents have guaranteed retirement benefits, a fixed income, and therefore often undertake unpaid activities/work. Some recall their professional activity with fondness and would gladly



return to it if it were not for the loss of health and age of life (Pikuła, 2017). The respondents who work from a pensioner's perspective do not focus on the educational and social aspects of work. The survey shows that the elderly perceive work as something that dignifies a person's life, gives it meaning and allows to satisfy the basic needs of themselves and their loved ones.

From the perspective of the meaning of life, the developmental aspect that was and is provided by work is extremely important for the seniors in the survey (Pikuła, 2018) despite the fact that due to the natural aging process, they are not able to follow all the novelties, trends in work and in the employment market. Nevertheless, the developmental aspect is significant, especially for personal fulfilment as well as making life more meaningful.

The study shows that older people whose working lives began in the post-war years believe that the first stage of their professional development was education at general secondary school or vocational school as well as their own skills development in non-formal education. The possibility of rapid social advancement and the acquisition of good financial resources motivated the respondents to develop. Along with the desire for development and change of economic status, the respondents were also motivated to develop by the prospect of attaining high positions, including managerial positions in the workplace. Factors which, according to the respondents, determined their development and success were: good health and support from their own family and family of origin, as well as forbearance of the spouse and lack of family or personal problems. Difficulties that appeared on the way of their professional development were mainly due to poor economic situation, to negative attitudes and personal characteristics of the managers at the workplaces and lack of support from the family and lack of forbearance of the husband – this was especially true for women who devoted more time to their own family than to professional development, especially in the first years of work (Pikuła, 2017; 2018).

In the final assessment, seniors in the survey are satisfied with their professional development and feel satisfaction and fulfilment in their professional and personal lives; they confirm that work gives meaning to life. In their opinion, commitment, intrinsic motivation, willingness to achieve a good material status and stability and guarantee of employment were important for their professional development (no short-term contracts, change of place of employment as a choice, not a necessity; respondents usually worked in one company during their whole professional life). They also observe that their work experience is quite different from what is characteristic of the contemporary labour market and employment. They would not necessarily know how to find their place in it. However, this does not change the fact that work is of value to them, and the possibility of working part-time or on commission gives them a sense of usefulness and of sharing their experience with the younger generation. Seniors who are not active in professional work maintain their experience by being involved in activities of daily living, as well as helping to raise grandchildren. Thus, work gives meaning to the lives of older people, and work experience still allows them to take on new challenges even though they do not necessarily follow the challenges of the changing modern world and the labour and employment market because of developmental reasons (late adulthood) and age- and health-specific opportunities. Their involvement in professional work allows them to be active in their retirement and to undertake activities according to their needs and abilities.



CONCLUSIONS

Work, regardless of the meaning we attach to it, touches on an extremely important area of human activity. This includes physical activity as well as cognitive, emotional and social activity, etc., which in effect gives a person's life a specific meaning and sets goals in this area for a number of decades. In relation to older people, it is of particular value in making life meaningful. It is not about prestige aspirations inherent in professional activity being the priority for older people as these 'gradually lose their significance in favour of an increased need for acceptance from the environment' (Trafiałek, 2003, p. 106). What is important is the feeling of being a useful, valuable person whose experience and life wisdom in relation to professional activities is as important as modern technological solutions.

Further research should aim to specify the importance of work in the perspective of the meaning of life among elderly people in the pan-European dimensions.

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