

## Friday Morning

KEYNOTE LECTURE; CHAIR: HERMAN BOUMA (THE NETHERLANDS)

*Ageing and work: Challenges and perspectives*

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**Introduction.** In many industrialized countries aging of the workforce is considered a rather serious problem. This is caused by aging of the population due to reduced birth rates and increased life expectations. So, the present policy of governments is to lengthen the working life and to encourage older employees to stay on the labour market as long as possible. However, in recent decades workers were usually allowed to retire early, before the mandatory retirement age. Therefore many older workers now have developed a different age culture and want to maintain the earlier rights of retirement at a younger age. These conflicting interests will induce socio-economic concerns but also pose many occupational health challenges. **Occupational gerontology.** The International Commission on Occupational Health raised a scientific committee 'Ageing and Work' in 1988. This committee has since then been very active in studying the different aspects of aging in relation to work capacity. Maintenance of work ability of older workers has become an important topic on which much research has been focused in the past decade. This was enhanced by the development in the 1980s of the Work Ability Index questionnaire (WAI). This questionnaire is now being used in several countries. Application of the WAI in research on older workers has proven that the influence of age on work ability is rather limited. In most studies the mean explained variance of WAI scores in relation to age was only 5-10%. The level of work ability must therefore be associated with several other variables such as health status, physical capacity, smoking or eating habits, etc. Also working conditions may have an important impact on work ability.

Work environment (safety, physical, chemical and biological exposures, ergonomics) and work organization (work stress, management, shift work) are potentially important factors that may affect work ability. An increased rate of aging and the development of chronic diseases are possibly mechanisms through which work ability could be negatively affected. The study of such mechanisms is only at the beginning. So far occupational research on older workers has mainly been concentrated on work ability and other variables in relation to calendar age. Important challenges in occupational health as well as in human gerontology are now the study of living and working conditions on aging. What are the best preventive strategies in order to maintain work ability and reduce the rate of aging? Occupational Gerontology is dealing with aspects of work conditions and their influence on the aging process and the rate of aging. This requires longitudinal studies of workers during the working life period and after retirement. **Perspectives of occupational gerontology.** Human gerontology comprises biomedical and psychosocial aspects of aging people usually beyond the age of 65 years. In occupational gerontology the age range of studied subjects is shifted to levels between 40 and 65 years. This is important in order to gain knowledge about positive and negative aspects of a prolonged working life as is nowadays promoted in many countries. The perspectives are a healthier working population which can possibly be motivated to continue working beyond the age of 65 years and a longer period of retirement in good mood and health.