



## Factsheet

# Life's a Juggle: the All-Round Worker

Resources for, and hindrances to, workers who are caring for loved ones and others – and taking training

In the Netherlands, many workers combine paid work with caregiving, learning, or both. Although the combination of these activities can be enriching, conflicts can arise as well. Workers can experience barriers at work that prevent them from caring for loved ones and learning as much as they need or would like to. To ensure that people can participate in paid work, care for their children, provide informal care and engage in lifelong learning, the quality of work needs to be ensured and enhanced and a combination of structural and cultural changes is needed. Employers, employees, and the government have a joint responsibility here.

### Working, caregiving, and learning

- In the series *The Changing World of Work (De veranderende wereld van werk)*, we look into the future of work and explore changes in the quality of paid work. We study what opportunities may arise for workers in the labor market, and what risks they may face, over time. We focus on the perspective of individual workers, and the intersection of the domains they participate in. We do so, because the quality of life is shaped by the sum of all the activities people engage in across a wide range of domains. Because many workers have children to care for, provide informal care, and pursue their own self-development both at and outside work, the present report focuses on how work can be structured so as to enable workers to participate in these activities in a sustainable way.
- Combining paid work, caregiving, and lifelong learning can be problematic because there are limits to the time and energy people have and to the attention they can give. Still, under the right circumstances, these activities can actually enrich each other. To understand the conditions under which workers can care for others and keep learning, we look at the resources that increase the scope for this at work, and at the barriers that

decrease it. We do this on the basis of an extensive study of the literature and on in-depth interviews with experts in science, policy, and practice.

### The relevance of working, caring and learning, both now and in the future

- Knowledge on resources and barriers can inform policy aimed at facilitating the widespread and active involvement of individuals over the long term. This is relevant now, partly because many people are struggling to combine paid work and caregiving, and because further training is lagging behind. It is likely this will become even more relevant in the future.
- Society in the years to come will ask a lot of people: in order to be able to keep the economy going, take care of the aging population, and keep adapting to changing technological possibilities, citizens will be required to work more, do more caregiving, and keep learning more and more.
- The aging of the population means that more and more informal care will have to be provided. In addition, technological developments and the openness of the Dutch economy are expected to lead to a dynamic labor market in which

employees will need to continuously acquire new skills and knowledge. And as the retirement age goes up in accordance as the population gets older, people's careers will span a wider age range and are more likely to involve caregiving and learning at several points over the years. As these developments converge, work, caregiving and taking training will be at odds with each other because they each demand time, energy, and attention. As we look to the future, then, it's important to ask how we can ensure that people can combine these roles and tasks in a sustainable way. Quality work that supports people, and that enables them to combine roles and tasks, has a key part to play here.

### The intersections among working, caregiving, and learning

- About two-thirds of working people have caregiving responsibilities and/or take training courses in addition to the paid work they do. Some workers say they find it difficult to combine paid work and caregiving. The level of conflict that is experienced, is higher among those providing informal care than it is among those who care for children. In addition, work pressure and caregiving responsibilities prevent some workers from continuing their personal development.
- Workers have access to different formal arrangements when it comes to caring for others and taking training. For example, employees are entitled to parental and family leave, and there are arrangements in place to encourage them to take training. However, the fact that there are formal opportunities available does not mean they will be taken.

### The quality of work and combining paid work with caregiving responsibilities

- The extent to which workers are able to provide care for children, family and friends depends on a wide range of work characteristics. For example, control over one's working hours is important, but it also has a downside. For some workers, control can erode the boundaries between the work and home domains, because it is less clear when work ends and life outside it begins. The pressure that this creates seems to be particularly concentrated among workers with a higher level of education and occupational status.
- Managers and colleagues also matter. They can provide practical and emotional support, for example by temporarily relieving someone of part of their workload or by taking over tasks. It is also important to model behavior: when a manager is open about their own caregiving responsibilities, it is easier for employees to discuss their own issues on this front. However, social support seems to be limited for workers with temporary and flexible contracts.
- Positive work experiences increase workers' wellbeing and provide energy that can spill over to the home domain and make it easier to carry out caregiving tasks. Work pressure does the opposite. There are signs that workers are better able to cope with work pressure if they have more resources, such as social support from supervisors and colleagues.
- Contrary to what is often assumed, it is not the case that every hour of work comes at the direct expense of caring for children and providing informal care, as in some zero-sum game. This is

partly because workers, but particularly women, protect their time with children, because parents and informal caregivers do not have to be available for children and sick relatives for the entire week, and because professional caregivers can also scale back other activities, such as leisure time.

### The quality of work and lifelong learning

- A large part of the learning activities employees engage in take place at work. By changing their working methods or by performing additional tasks or a different role, employees acquire new knowledge and skills on the job. Doing work that they feel is challenging, interesting, and varied promotes workers' informal learning. Organizations can stimulate this by broadening and enriching tasks in which employees are given more responsibility. This increases the employability within and outside the organization.
- Direct supervisors play an important role in formal training. Some of the courses and workshops that employees take are paid for or organized by the employer. Workers take training less often if they have to do so entirely on their own time, if work pressure is high, or if they face time restrictions, for example because they have family commitments. The incentive to take training is therefore greater if this can be done during working hours.
- What backgrounds colleagues have also matters: people who work in more-diverse organizations and teams are also exposed to a greater range of views, knowledge, and skills, and they can learn from these.

### Social differences

- Different groups of workers are able to, want to, and are allowed to do different things when it comes to caregiving tasks and learning. For both caregiving and learning, workers with a higher level of education and those in the higher professions are, in many ways, in the most favorable position. In order to attract and retain these groups, employers invest relatively heavily in them, for example by offering them favorable employment conditions and training opportunities.
- The working conditions of female workers are more favorable than those of men, when the care for loved ones is concerned. Among the possible explanations for this is that women often put in shorter days and weeks, their use of formal arrangements such as leave is looked at less harshly, and managers and colleagues are more understanding of their responsibilities outside work. This difference is linked to a broader social norm whereby women are still expected to prioritize care, while men are expected to prioritize paid work.
- Across the board, workers with permanent contracts are in a more favorable starting position than those with temporary or flexible contracts, because the lasting relationships they have at work ensure that they will be invested in and that they can count on more support from colleagues and supervisors. Employers invest less in training temporary employees, because the payoff will be low. Self-employed people have a great deal of flexibility, and under the right conditions they can use that to balance work and private life and take on interesting and challenging assignments.

### Future opportunities – and obstacles

- In principle, if the labor market becomes tighter because large groups of the ageing work population exit it, the bargaining power of workers will go up. Employers will then be more inclined to accommodate employees' felt need to have more scope for caregiving and learning.
- Technologization offers plenty of opportunities for combining work with caregiving and learning. At the same time, the blurring of boundaries between domains can also cause stress because workers can be reached anytime, anywhere.
- If the flexibilization of the labor market continues, this could mean that employees receive less support from their work for caregiving and learning.

Experience from previous crises suggests that support for caregiving and training declines in times of economic uncertainty and rising unemployment. The coronavirus crisis could therefore limit the scope that employers offer employees to take care of others and engage in further training and education. At the same time, greater job insecurity makes the urgency and importance of retraining clearer, and that in turn could mean that the government and workers themselves put more effort into it. It is also conceivable that the experience gained by working from home will mean that workers and employers will be inclined to stick with this practice even after the coronavirus crisis is over. That would increase the possibilities for dividing time among work, caregiving and learning in ways that best suit workers themselves.

### Policy implications

- As we have seen from this knowledge synthesis, what individual workers can and are allowed to do with regard to caregiving tasks and learning depends on their own behavior, on what resources are available to them, and on the level of support in the organization. In addition, the larger social context, with its formal institutions and its informal rules of the game, is also a factor in this dynamic. It follows from this observation that a joint reflection, based on a shared responsibility, is required to facilitate sustainable and broad participation in such activities as paid work, caregiving, and lifelong learning.
- If interventions are developed at the intersections among working, caregiving, and learning, it will be advisable to focus on a combination of structural and cultural changes. Structural changes can be brought about by optimizing existing arrangements and supplementing them wherever they are found wanting. This could include making leave arrangements more attractive, and formalizing support for training courses. However, the effectiveness of such long-term changes is expected to be limited if it is not accompanied by a commitment to bringing about cultural change. When recourse to old and new forms of formal support is not accepted – whether by society, the employer, colleagues, or workers themselves – take-up will lag behind, and the actual scope for caregiving and learning will broaden only to a very limited extent.

### The Changing World of Work (*De veranderende wereld van werk*) series

- This publication is part of a series that the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (scp) has put out, entitled *The Changing World of Work (De veranderende wereld van werk)*, which looks at the quality of work in the years ahead. Developments in the labor market, the opportunities they bring for the quality of work, and the risks they pose to it, need to be closely monitored, because they will have an impact on the wellbeing of individuals, the workings of organizations, and the overall quality of life in society. As well as providing an income, high-quality work can also give meaning to people's lives and foster their personal development. It also means they can structure their lives in such a way as to combine working, caregiving, and learning in a sustainable way.
- By bringing together knowledge about the consequences of labor-market developments for workers, the scp is helping build a knowledge base for a future-proof labor-market policy that benefits both workers and society as a whole. This knowledge synthesis, the third publication in this series, focuses on the link between the quality of work and participation in caregiving and learning. In doing so, it also considers potential risks and opportunities that may arise under the influence of developments on the labor market. Earlier in this series, studies were published on the effects of platformization and robotization on the quality of work.

For more information see *The Changing World of Work (De veranderende wereld van werk)* at [www.scp.nl](http://www.scp.nl) or [english.scp.nl](http://english.scp.nl).

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