

English summary
of Fafo-rapport 2020:18

**Senior workers in
the daycare sector**
Retention, attrition and
reasons for resignation

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About the project

The primary aim of this project was to generate new knowledge about why senior workers leave their daycare job and what can be done so that more seniors can, and will, remain in their job. Why did they quit their daycare job – and what did they do afterwards? Did they retire (at what age), did they change jobs, did they switch industries, are they receiving a work assessment allowance or disability benefit – or are they unemployed and looking for work? And what might have been done so that they could have continued working in daycare a little longer? The project was funded by The Centre for Senior Policy, the Union of Education Norway, the Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees, and the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities.

In addition, the project aims to update the existing knowledge on what it is like to be a senior worker in municipal and private daycare centres. With regard to the new public pension scheme in the public sector, the project is expected to help set the agenda in the efforts to prevent resignations and develop a more targeted senior policy for daycare centres.

The questions outlined above are investigated by analysing data from the registry-based employment statistics from Statistics Norway (see Chapter 2), as well as data from a study (online survey) of 5276 daycare employees (50–67 years old), organised by the Union of Education Norway and the Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees (Chapters 3–8).

Employment and attrition (registry data)

In the ten-year period from 2005 to 2015, the number of daycare employees in Norway increased considerably, from 65 000 to 92 000. During that period, the number of employees aged 50 and older rose by almost 10 000, from well above 11 000 to nearly 21 000, and their share of the employees in the sector increased from 18 to 23 per cent. Concurrent with this increase, more of the senior workers held full-time positions.

One reason for this increase in senior workers is that the oldest groups are postponing their retirement from the labour force more often than in the past. The reduced retirement rate in the daycare sector, especially among the oldest workers, has resulted in *fewer job changes from the daycare sector to other industries*.

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tries towards the end of their careers, and thus a majority of senior workers are remaining in the sector until they leave the labour force altogether.

The senior workers who left the daycare sector often held part-time positions, and a large share of those who found jobs elsewhere went to public administration, teaching and the health and social services. A large share of those who quit their jobs and left the labour force began collecting a work assessment allowance (AAP) or disability benefit. Two-thirds of the seniors who left the labour force before they turned 62 years of age received these benefits. Among workers who quit between the ages of 62 and 66 about four out of ten received health-related benefits, and a slightly larger share received a contractual early retirement pension (AFP), while a small group received a pension from the Norwegian National Insurance Scheme.

The employee's position or occupation in the daycare centre has limited impact on the percentage of workers who change jobs. However, those in leadership positions have less of a tendency to leave their jobs before turning 62, while they are also the most likely to leave before turning 67.

Employment and attrition (survey data)

The online survey showed that 16,1 percent of the senior workers (50+) had left their daycare job between 2015 and 2020. Well over half of them had retired, primarily with a contractual early retirement pension (AFP). One of eight were receiving a disability benefit, and one of ten were collecting a work assessment allowance (AAP). Those who switched to another type of work accounted for 20 per cent of those who had left the daycare job.

In addition, well over four per cent of the sample had worked outside of the daycare sector in certain periods. In other words, slightly less than four out of five had been in their daycare job for the entire five-year period from 2015 to 2020, while one out of five had quit their daycare job, either temporarily or permanently.

Attrition was somewhat higher among childcare and youth workers, skilled workers and assistants than among daycare teachers, educational supervisors, local directors, etc. This applies both to the share of workers who switched to jobs outside of daycare and to the share of AAP and disability benefit recipients.

A majority of those who left their daycare job and found other work went to jobs in care services, teaching or public administration. Sixty per cent said that their job changes had made it easier for them to keep working, and 36 per cent had received a salary increase.

Moreover, six per cent of the sample stated that they had applied for one or more jobs outside of daycare between 2015 and 2020, but did not change jobs. This is the case for twice as many in the groups of daycare teachers, educational

supervisors, local directors, etc. as for the groups of childcare and youth workers, skilled workers and assistants.

Reasons for resignation

There can be a difference between reasons that a worker intends to quit a job and seek employment elsewhere, and reasons to actually choose to change jobs and/or take early retirement. This may be related to structural conditions in the labour market, the individual's work situation and working conditions, or personal and/or family circumstances.

Workers who changed jobs can be divided into three groups. Those who leave: 1) due to health problems and/or excessive work demands, which comprises the largest group by far, 2) because they wanted a more challenging job, or 3) because they had held a temporary or substitute position.

While all occupational groups emphasised health problems/illness and/or the desire for a less stressful job as their main reasons for changing jobs, reasons 1 and 3 were most important for childcare and youth workers, skilled workers and assistants, and reason 2 was given almost exclusively by daycare teachers, educational supervisors, local directors, etc. Few workers changed jobs due to closure and downsizing, privatisation or remunicipalisation.

Almost six of ten of those who changed jobs due to health problems/illness attributed these entirely or partly to their job in daycare. Inadequate staffing and noise were the main problems among those who said they wanted a less stressful job. In addition, 18 per cent emphasised that their job was emotionally demanding.

The most important reason for **job seekers** (those who had applied for, but not did change jobs) was excessive work demands, i.e. they wanted a less stressful and/or a physically easier job. This applied to the childcare and youth workers, skilled workers and assistants, as well as to the daycare teachers, educational supervisors and local directors. Far fewer of the job seekers than those who changed jobs cited health problems/illness as the reason they wanted a different job. However, the share of those who said they applied for other jobs because they wanted more challenging work was the same as for those who changed jobs. Otherwise, a poor working environment, health problems/illness, a desire for a higher salary and structural conditions such as closures, privatisation and remunicipalisation seemed to be far more important reasons for the childcare and youth workers, skilled workers and assistants seeking other jobs than for the daycare teachers, educational supervisors and local directors. Few emphasised a small professional environment, which was mentioned primarily by the job-seeking daycare teachers, educational supervisors and local directors. The job seekers who stressed health problems/illness associated this with their daycare job. Similarly, those who changed jobs found inadequate staffing and excessive noise

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at work to be particularly stressful, and this was especially the case for childcare and youth workers, skilled workers and assistants. Those who primarily related stress to the emotional demands of the job were daycare teachers, educational supervisors and local directors.

Older daycare employees who had taken **early retirement** related this to health problems, exhaustion and physically and/or psychologically demanding work. In addition, several said that they wanted more leisure time, which can just as well be understood as a wish to avoid demanding work as a desire for more holidays and free time. A not insignificant share also said that it was convenient to leave because their spouse was a pensioner or would be retiring soon. Interestingly, some also cited a loss of motivation and interest in the work duties as a reason for retiring early. This was especially the case for daycare teachers, educational supervisors and local directors. Moreover, these groups of workers put greater emphasis on psychological demands and the lack of opportunities to combine part-time work with a contractual early retirement pension (AFP) than childcare and youth workers, skilled workers and assistants, for whom physical demands, health problems/exhaustion and spousal retirement were far more important. In other words, it appears that the physical working environment combined with health problems was a greater problem for the groups with less education, who work more directly with the children, than among the groups with a higher level of education, more of whom hold leadership positions and thus have more administrative tasks. In the latter groups, the psychological demands and maintaining motivation for and interest in the work after a long career seem to be a bigger problem.

Among the **workers who stayed**, i.e. those who had chosen to remain in their daycare job and never applied for work elsewhere or even considered it, a determining factor was their belief that seniors had a difficult time finding a new job or that they enjoyed their job, liked the working environment and their work duties, and felt appreciated. However, their reasons for staying varied somewhat depending on their level of education and type of job. Local directors stayed in their jobs mainly for the enjoyment of the work and the good working environment, while assistants, skilled workers and childcare and youth workers were less confident about finding other employment. In other words, a number of them felt ‘stuck’ in their jobs.

Working environment and working conditions

For many senior workers, resignation and early retirement are related to the working environment and working conditions. As mentioned above, the largest share of those who left their daycare jobs related their resignation to health problems and/or excessive work demands. This chapter discusses how daycare employees assess certain facets of the working environment. In no way does it

cover all the possible aspects of the working environment, but it addresses certain conditions shown in a previous qualitative study (Midtsundstad, Bogen and Hermansen 2016) to be especially challenging for senior workers in daycare centres.

Since the increase in the staffing standard on 1 August 2018, daycare centres now have an average of 5.7 children per employee, and 94 per cent of the centres satisfy the requirement of at least one employee for every three children under the age of three and at least one employee for every six children over the age of three. Despite this, many daycare employees still view inadequate staffing as a problem. Well over half state that the daycare centre where they work is not fully staffed on a weekly basis. This applies across occupations, but childcare and youth workers and skilled workers state this slightly more often than local directors.

Almost eight of ten senior daycare employees also experience noise as a major problem. This is in spite of the fact that 55 per cent say their daycare centre has introduced noise-reduction measures, and half of them think that the measures have reduced the noise level.

Most senior daycare workers state that they have access to a staff room/lunchroom. Only two to three per cent say that their daycare centre does not have one. However, there are few opportunities to take a short break when needed, as only one in three say that they can do so. Most workers agree about this, except for local directors, of whom 78 per cent have this opportunity.

Fifty-eight per cent of the senior workers confirm that they find the physical demands of the job to be extremely challenging, and 70 per cent believe they are overworked (have too much to do). The share of workers who feel this way about the job demands is high within all occupational groups, except for the directors. Thirty-five per cent also feel that their work is psychologically demanding, and 38 per cent also say that they rarely have time to perform their work duties in the way they think they ought to be done, which may be related to the workload.

In spite of this, most workers believe that they have a great deal of freedom in their jobs. Only eight per cent have a different view. Similarly, most believe that their work duties are both challenging and rewarding and that their professional knowledge and the tasks they are responsible for correspond well, although 15 per cent also feel that the goals and expectations of the job are unclear. Moreover, most have a positive relationship with their immediate superior and feel appreciated.

We find almost the same pattern of responses among those who quit their daycare job and those who chose to stay. However, a few more of those who quit state that they did not have a particularly good relationship with their immediate superior or did not feel valued. Slightly fewer of these also felt that they had a great deal of freedom at work.

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There are small differences in how the occupational groups assess their working conditions. The exception to this is the directors, who give more weight to the psychological rather than the physical demands of the job. In addition, more assistants and childcare and youth workers than daycare teachers state that their relationship with their immediate superior is not very good and that they do not feel appreciated. However, the differences in this regard, are rather small.

Analyses of attrition and retirement

This chapter explores the characteristics of workers who leave the daycare profession as opposed to those who choose to remain in their job. The aim is to find out whether certain features of the working conditions or conditions related to the home sphere or career appear to play a decisive role in the workers' decision.

Most of the factors that increase the likelihood of a senior worker changing jobs also appear to increase the probability that the individual will seek other work outside of daycare. However, those who remained in their daycare job despite seeking other work more often have permanent contracts, and therefore do not need to quit. They also feel that their immediate superior appreciates them, which was not true to the same degree among those who change jobs. Those who choose to stay more often work part-time rather than full-time. This could indicate that they have secured more suitable working hours and are therefore better able to tolerate the demands and stress of their daycare job. The same applies to the opportunity to take short breaks, which may also have helped to reduce the sense of stress in an otherwise hectic workday. On the other hand, it could also be the case that those who remained in their day-care jobs did not get another job offer and may therefore have a greater need to portray their job as 'good enough'.

The analyses also show that the workers who changed jobs and those who took early retirement are quite different. While assistants, childcare and youth workers, and skilled workers were mainly the ones who changed jobs, there seems to be little difference among the occupations with regard to retirement and retirement plans. Those who changed jobs were also more often temporary employees, and while the early pensioners felt their work was quite psychologically demanding and that the staffing was inadequate, this is not the case for those who changed jobs. What they have in common is that they did not feel valued by their immediate superior and found it difficult to take small breaks during the workday.

Regarding those who are still working and plan to keep working until at least 67, they have already remained in work into their senior years and are in good health. Additionally, they are more often single and thus more dependent on the wages and the work community.

Adaptations and measures in the workplace

Just as important as identifying what does not work is to identify what is actually being done to encourage senior workers to remain in their daycare job, and whether these efforts appear to work. This chapter provides an overview of how senior workers feel about the adaptations and measures being offered today.

Over 90 per cent of daycare employees who started collecting a disability benefit between 2015 and 2020 had a 100 per cent reduced earning capacity due to illness/injury and had been on sick leave and/or had received an AAP from one to four years prior. Furthermore, 270 of the well over 5200 workers in the sample were on sick leave at the time, of which 57 per cent had been on sick leave for three months or longer. Forty-two per cent of those receiving a disability benefit and 56 per cent of the AAP recipients believed that their health problems were work related. Similarly, 50 per cent of those on sick leave believed that their sick leave was connected wholly or partly to conditions at their workplace.

However, with regard to adaptations and prevention of long-term sickness absence, only 30 per cent of the disability benefit recipients and 51 per cent of the AAP recipients, but 76 per cent of workers on long-term sick leave, said that their local director had been engaged in finding a solution to stop them from leaving. In addition, 83 per cent of those on sick leave stated that their employer had contacted them during the period of their sick leave. Fifty-three per cent of the disability benefit recipients and 31 per cent of the AAP recipients had also received an offer of work adaptations while they were on sick leave. This also applied to 47 per cent of those on long-term sick leave. The most common measures offered were other, easier work tasks and/or ergonomic measures or technical aids. Over four of ten of the disability benefit recipients and the AAP recipients for whom adaptations had been made believed that this had made it easier for them to remain in their job (at least for a period of time). The same applied to 82 per cent of those on long-term sick leave at the time of the survey.

How can attrition and early retirement be prevented?

The survey included an open ended question where participants could suggest measures which may prolong careers. This question was answered by 176 employees who quit, 350 workers who had taken early retirement and 500 individuals who had continued working.

To summarise, the majority of workers emphasise general preventive measures such as increased staffing, reduced work hours and better physical adaptations. They believe that increasing the basic staffing level throughout the day (including during the early and late shifts) would help to reduce the excessive work demands. The same applies to greater use of substitute workers to cover for employees on sick leave. In addition, many mention noise-reducing measures and the need for better physical adaptations of equipment and work materials, as

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well as ergonomic and technical aids. Furthermore, a significant share of workers points out the importance of being seen and appreciated by their local director and colleagues and being recognised for the expertise they have attained during their many years of work in day-care.

In addition to the general, preventive measures, workers suggested a number of individually targeted measures such as lighter work duties, the chance to transfer from the younger to the older child department or the opposite, not being required to do certain tasks, the opportunity to work reduced hours and/or to combine work with a pension in periods up until leaving work for good. A few also wanted special senior measures such as reduced work hours with the same salary, although such suggestions were not prevalent.

Summary and discussion

In conclusion, the various analyses and findings are viewed in conjunction with each other. The objective is to clarify the essence of the attrition problem and identify potential solutions.

Many remain in their job until retirement

Attrition in the daycare sector can be defined as the share of employees that choose to leave the sector in a given year or over a specified period of time, either because they switch to another type of work, go on long-term sick leave and transition to a work assessment allowance (AAP) or disability benefit, or take a contractual early retirement pension (AFP) or another type of retirement pension.

Analysis of the registry data showed that the share of older daycare employees has steadily increased, which may indicate that fewer are leaving the daycare profession. Furthermore, the share of senior workers who switch jobs from the daycare sector to other industries towards the end of their careers has declined. In other words, more of these workers than previously are staying in their daycare job up until they retire or take a work assessment allowance or receive a disability benefit. To sum up, this implies that the main reason senior workers resign from daycare centres is health related and is not primarily linked to their desire for another type of work.

Reasons for resignation – health problems, excessive work demands and stress

The reasons senior workers give for leaving their daycare job varies somewhat depending on *who they are*, i.e. their occupation, and *what they do afterwards*, i.e. a new job, unemployment, AAP, disability benefit or retirement pension.

However, what most workers who leave their daycare job have in common is that their resignation is related to health problems/exhaustion, work demands

and stress, which in turn are related to a very challenging job both physically and psychologically, intense emotional demands, inadequate staffing and/or noise. This pattern recurs when they are asked to assess the working environment and working conditions (Chapter 5) and when they are asked to state the main reasons for switching to another type of work, applying for other jobs or taking early retirement (Chapter 4). The multivariate analyses in Chapter 6 also indicate that it is physically demanding work, and partly health concerns that is the decisive factors, in addition to lack of appreciation and limited opportunities to take short breaks. The same pattern is also seen in the employees' suggestions for measures and changes that could prevent early retirement and resignation (Chapter 8).

Retention – increased staffing, physical adaptations and feeling valued at work

The majority of senior workers who leave their day-care job believe that increased **staffing** can result in more employees staying longer in their job. According to the seniors, an increase in staffing will reduce the physical and psychological demands of the job, as there will be more employees to share the workload. It will also enable full staffing levels during the early and late shifts, which they feel are particularly stressful. It will also have a positive impact on the children because the employees will have more time to see and follow up each child. Having more workers also makes it possible to divide the children into smaller groups, which can reduce the noise level. An increase in staffing will also allow more employees to take a time-out or short break as needed. The latter point can be important for workers' ability to tackle the intense emotional strain that many experience in their job.

The downside of increased staffing is of course the cost involved. The question then becomes whether the cost of more staffing makes up for the costs related to a reduction in the number of workers on health-related welfare benefits, and of course who benefits from less sickness absence and retirement versus who bears the cost of increased staffing.

The desire for reduced work hours, which many also suggest, either as a scheme that includes all employees or only seniors over a certain age, raises some of the same issues, as this will also require more employees and will be costly, especially if an employee works fewer hours without taking a pay cut. Another measure related to staffing, which will be far less expensive and easier to implement, concerns the substitute worker schemes in which a substitute is always called in when an employee is off sick.

Noise is a particular burden in day-care centres. Much has been done to prevent excessive noise, but 45 per cent of senior workers in the survey still say that no noise-reducing measures have been introduced. In addition to noise, many emphasise the physical demands of the job. Beyond adding 'more hands', many

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believe that more physical adaptations and ergonomic and technical aids will be helpful, such as customised chairs and tables for adults as well as for children, lifting devices, stools next to nappy changing tables, etc.

Many also point out the physical strain of the job and the intense emotional demands involved in working in a day-care centre. However, psychological demands are not so easy to eliminate or reduce with measures and technical aids, although the burdens can likely be reduced somewhat by allowing more opportunities for workers to take time-outs and short breaks throughout the workday or by giving the individual worker responsibility for fewer children. In other words, this is also largely related to staffing levels.

In addition to the aforementioned preventive measures and the changes targeted towards all employees, individual and customised adaptations will be needed for particular employees. In these cases, the needs and preferences will be individual, as what is a burden for one person is not necessarily a burden for another. It may be beneficial for the leadership and employee representatives to review and clarify possible alternative tasks and opportunities for adaptation in the workplace so that these are in place should the need arise. In this context, it would also be beneficial for the parties to agree in advance on what criteria workers need to meet to receive the adaptations, i.e. who should have the right to what under which circumstances.

Many workers also seem to want more opportunity to gradually reduce their work hours and combine a pension with work. Local directors in particular said that they wanted this opportunity, but that it had not been possible to achieve. The desire to gradually reduce work hours requires more part-time positions, which can conflict with the general efforts of municipalities to reduce the share of part-time positions (especially in the nursing and care sector). However, this does not need to be a problem if part-time work is reserved primarily for those who receive part-time disability benefit and workers over 62 who combine work and pension, and if the desire for part-time work is solved by, for example, allowing two seniors to share one full-time position.

Last, but not least, it appears that many senior workers stress the importance of being seen and appreciated by the leadership and colleagues for their expertise and their work contribution, which is corroborated by previous research. This is a cost-free measure, but it requires colleagues to acknowledge each other across educational fields, work duties and possibly hierarchies. Leadership is a keyword in this context. In other words, it is crucial to recruit people with the right qualities for leadership positions.