

Return to Work after Chronic Disease: What Role for Industrial Relations in Diverse National Policy Frameworks?

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REWIR final conference, 29 January 2021, project no. VS/2019/0075

Project aims:

- Role that industrial relations play in extending the working lives of EU citizens through work retention and integration after exposure to chronic diseases in conditions of a demographic and technological change
- Multi-level governance perspective: EU-level, national-level and workplace-level

Novel data collected:

- Stakeholder interviews/discussions (EU-level and 6 EU member states)
- Surveys

Workers' survey (927/11)

- Experience with return to work
- Identify relevant stakeholders for supporting workers job retention process
- Motivation to join a trade union after a RTW experience

Managers' survey (164/6)

- Experience with return to work at workplace level
- Potential for extending union-management relations
- Diverse approaches across diverse industrial relations?

Social partners' survey (123/6)

- Perceptions, expectations, opportunities
- National/EU-level policy making
- Implementation at workplace level

Policy frameworks meeting industrial relations



Industrial relations system	Frameworks for return to work policies and systems			
	Inclusive system, effective policy coordination	Developed policies but limited policy coordination	Limited institutional support and ad hoc policy initiatives	Generally limited return to work framework for promoting labour market access
Liberal/Anglo-Saxon/Anglophone		(UK)	Ireland	
Southern		Italy (France)		
Negotiated social partnership	(Netherlands)	Belgium		
CEE neoliberal			Estonia, Romania	
CEE embedded neoliberal				Slovakia

- Lack of dedicated policy frameworks; where chronic disease is captured in policy and legislation, it typically comes under the umbrella of disability

Belgium: Act on Wellbeing at Work, Compulsory Healthcare and Indemnity Insurance Legislation, Anti-discrimination Legislation

Ireland: Act Wellbeing at Work, Compulsory Healthcare and Indemnity Insurance Legislation, Anti-discrimination Legislation

Italy: Provisions/protection derive from the condition of disability, a concept that has moreover taken on different meanings according to the objectives pursued from time to

Estonia: Act Wellbeing at Work, Compulsory Healthcare and Indemnity Insurance Legislation, Anti-discrimination Legislation

Romania: Act on Wellbeing at Work, Compulsory Healthcare and Indemnity Insurance Legislation, Anti-discrimination Legislation

Slovakia: Act Wellbeing at Work, Compulsory Healthcare and Indemnity Insurance Legislation, Anti-discrimination Legislation

Policy gap:

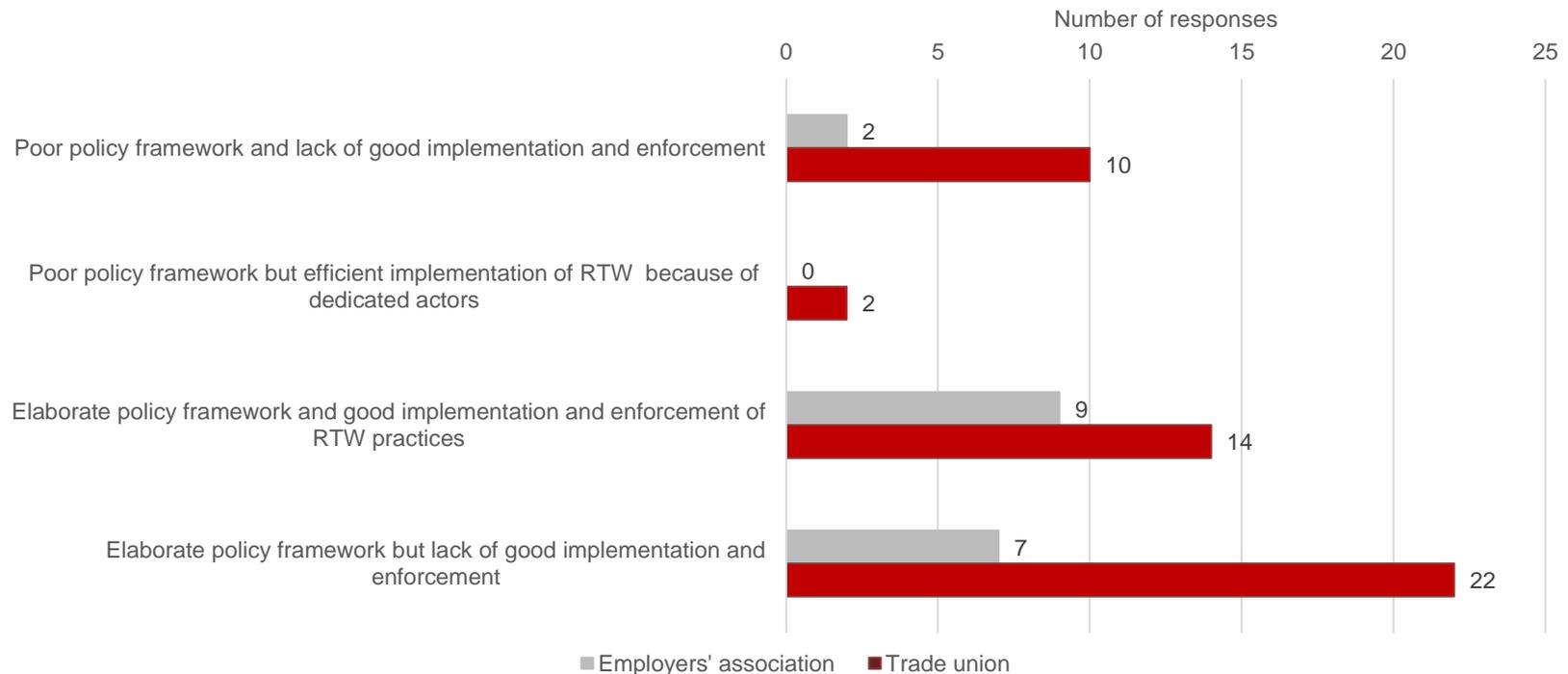
- many workers after chronic disease do not transition to a formal recognition of disability status and related support, lack of stakeholder cooperation
- return to work of workers with chronic disease insufficiently covered by existing policies, lack of rehabilitation support and

Opportunity for industrial relations actors and other stakeholders to support such workers and to facilitate policy improvements?

Social partners' views on national policy frameworks



- Paradox: the majority of social partners find national policy frameworks elaborate, gaps identified in their enforcement and implementation practice



Source: REWIR Social partner survey (N=83). RTW = Return to Work.

Social partners in return to work implementation

Activities perceived as relevant by social partners for return to work

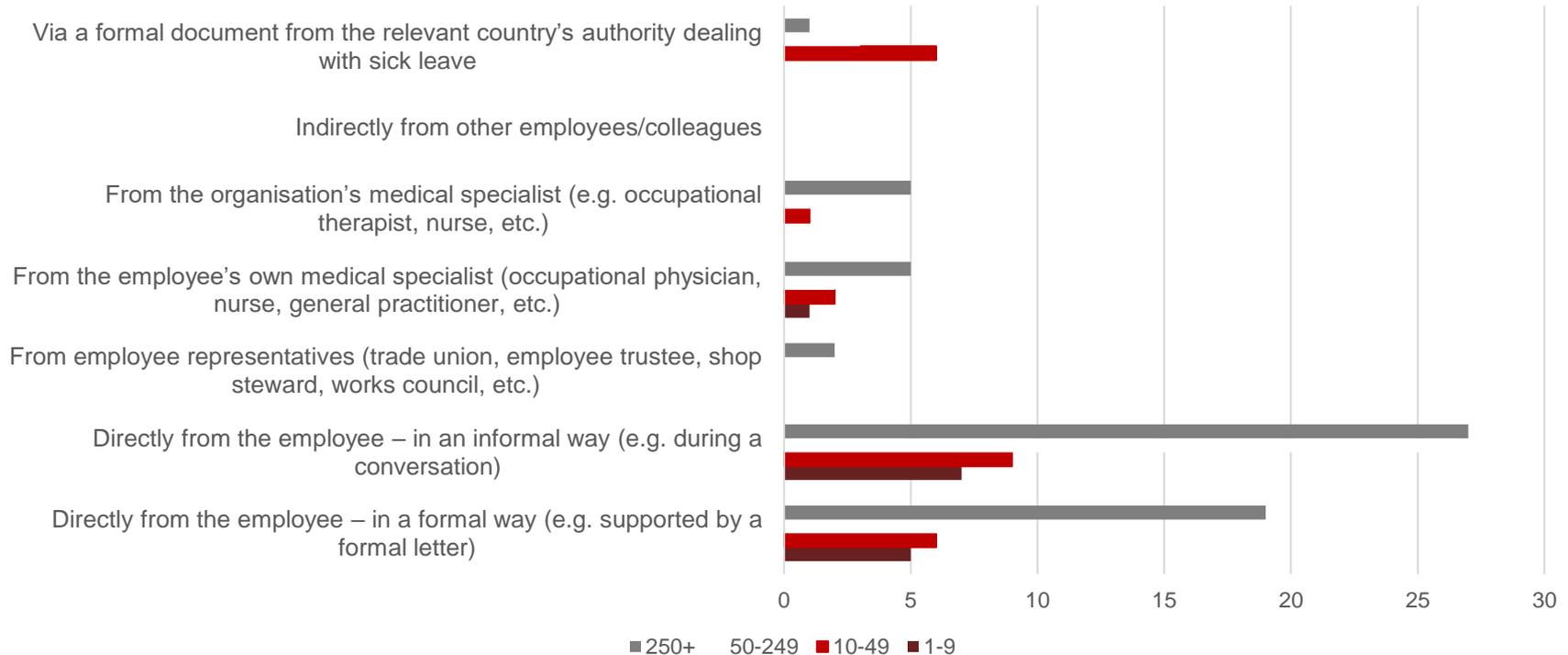


Source: REWIR Social partner survey (N=83).

- other: monitoring the RTW policy/implementation at national, sectoral and establishment levels, involvement following a specific goal, e.g., pensioners' work possibilities after the pandemic, services provided to member employers and/or associations (e.g. advise on themes of wellbeing, RTW, or addressing specific concerns of members on a case-by-case basis)

Return to work at the workplace

How do managers learn about a worker returning to work after chronic disease?



Source: REWIR Managers' survey, N=184 responses.

Country-specific IR differences did not seem to influence these opinions, as the 'informality' aspect was the most frequently reported mode of learning about RTW by managers across respondents from all countries

Return to work at the workplace

Gradual return to work – managers' experiences with workers' interaction during their sick leave

- **Keeping contact with the worker on sick leave**
 - regular in Belgium, Italy and Ireland
 - irregular in Estonia, Romania and Slovakia
- **Involvement of workers in work-related tasks during sick leave** - highest involvement in Romania, some involvement in Italy, but marginal in other countries
- Contacts mostly informal (e.g. phone call, friendly conversation, indirect information via the workers' colleagues) - Belgium and Estonia
- Contacts drawing on formalized procedures (e.g., set HR procedure, formally requesting regular medical reports on the continuity of the sick leave) – Romania and Italy

Return to work at the workplace



Workers' perspectives:

- Support received from employer – no clear country pattern
- Connecting experience of chronic disease, return to work and trade union membership
- Workers diagnosed with chronic disease in the past and at the same time are trade union members (130 responses in total):
 - not satisfied with union support, and if 'moderately' satisfied did not expect more
- Workers diagnosed with chronic disease recently and at the same time are trade union members (30 responses in total):
 - reasonably satisfied, or did not inform the union about their condition
- Does experience with chronic disease motivate workers to join unions?
 - 155 respondents did not and 35 did consider joining a union upon their (dis)satisfaction with union support upon sick leave and return to work
- **Difference in time of diagnosis – improvement in union involvement?**
- **Lack of systematic pressures on the workers' side on trade unions to engage in the RTW process**

- Active ageing and labour market participation belong to key priorities of EU-level policies
- Policy framework across diverse EU members states do not fully respond to these priorities
- Informality in workplace interactions prevails even in countries with developed policy framework
- Challenges of stakeholder coordination
- **What role for industrial relations?**

Despite different policy frameworks and industrial relations systems, a greater potential for industrial relations actors in facilitating return to work persists



Policy level



Collective bargaining



Workplace level

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