Mind the gap: Italy: Employee perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Organizations that want to remain employers-of-choice must periodically assess how shifts in the business environment might affect the effectiveness of their talent management strategies, policies, and programs. Globalization and changes in the age composition of the workforce—two important 21st Century trends that affect today’s businesses—makes it important for managers to consider:

- How does age affect employees’ preferences for an idealized job and their assessments of their employment experiences?
- Do employees' perceptions of their employment experiences vary from country to country?

What does “mind the gap” mean?

Train stations across England play recorded messages to remind passengers that they should “mind the gap.” These words of caution urge train travelers to pay attention to the space between the door of the train car and the platform in the station for safe commutes and travels.

For this series of our research publications, we have adopted the phrase "mind the gap." The Mind the Gap series aim to remind employers to pay attention to any gaps that might exist between employees’ priorities and need and employers’ allocation of workplace-based resources. Our Mind the Gap papers also aim to help our readers to such gaps in quality of employment in other country contexts.
The Sloan Center on Aging & Work in Boston, in collaboration with the Middlesex University Business School in London, created the Mind the Gap series to provide employers with basic employment-related information country-by-country. There are two types of papers in the Mind the Gap series.

Employee Series: This series examines the perspectives that adults of different ages have about employment and the assessments that they make about their employment experiences. These papers focus on one central question: Does age affect employees’ preferences for an idealized job and their assessments of their employment experiences?

Employer Series: This series examines the prevalence of human resource policies and programs at workplaces in a selected country. Because most talent-management strategies and programs are age-neutral, we compare the availability of selected human resource policies in practices in the targeted country with the availability of similar policies and practices in a small number of countries with approximate economic circumstances. These papers focus on one core question: How does the availability of human resource policies and programs in the targeted country compare with other countries?

Although papers in both series focus on a single country, when the information contained in two or more papers are considered in tandem, it is possible to consider whether employees’ perceptions of their employment experiences vary from country to country.

Table of Contents

Quality of Employment: Dimensions of a “Good Job” and a “Good Place to Work” 3

Quality of Employment in Italy

- Indicators of Fair, Attractive, and Competitive Compensation & Benefits 4
- Indicators of Opportunities for Development, Learning & Advancement 5
- Indicators of Wellness, Health & Safety Protections 6
- Indicators of Opportunities for Meaningful Work 7
- Indicators of Provisions for Employment Security & Predictabilities 8
- Indicators of Workplace Flexibility 9
- Indicators of Culture of Respect, Inclusion & Equity 10
- Indicators of Promotion of Constructive Relationships at the Workplace 11

Conclusion: Closing The Gap 12
Quality of Employment: Dimensions of a “Good Job” and a “Good Place to Work”

Most people would agree that good jobs are a good thing. High-quality jobs offer benefits to employees and to the organizations where they work.

- **Benefits for Employees**: The quality of employment affects the health and wellbeing of employees. Research confirms that poor-quality jobs (such as very demanding jobs or jobs requiring extreme work hours, particularly those where employees do not have access to resources to meet the demands), are associated with negative outcomes, including high stress levels and physiological reactions, like cardio-vascular problems.¹

- **Benefits for Employers**: Employers often connect the quality of employment they offer to employees to their employer-of-choice strategies. There is some evidence that the adoption of policies and practices that promote the quality of employment available to employees is related to positive outcomes for organizations, such as customer satisfaction and organizational performance.² Employer-of-choice strategies can result in enhanced employee engagement which, in turn, can be linked to organizational outcomes, including financial measures. For example, higher employee engagement can reduce costs such as those associated with unwanted turnover. One study found that 59% of highly engaged employees report that they intend to stay with their employers in comparison to the 24% of disengaged employees who “intend to stay.”³ A number of studies have linked employee job satisfaction with positive performance indicators. Fortune reports positive relationships between being recognized as a “great place to work” and stock indices.⁴⁻⁵

In this paper, we focus on eight important dimensions of the quality of employment:

- Fair, Attractive, and Competitive Compensation & Benefits
- Opportunities for Development, Learning & Advancement
- Wellness, Health & Safety Protections
- Opportunities for Meaningful Work
- Provisions for Employment Security & Predictabilities
- Workplace Flexibility
- Culture of Respect, Inclusion & Equity
- Promotion of Constructive Relationships at the Workplace

The following sections of this paper use the Quality of Employment framework as a structure to discuss the perspectives of employees about their employment situations.
QUALITY EMPLOYMENT IN ITALY:

I. Indicators of Fair, Attractive, and Competitive Compensation & Benefits

► Compensation and benefits are distributed in a fair and equitable manner, meeting most of employees’ basic economic needs.

• According to the 2006 Quality of Work Survey conducted by the Institute for the Development of Vocational Training (ISFOL), earnings systematically change with the employment status in Italy: 46.8% of temporary workers earn less than €900 ($1,110) a month, while 70.2% of permanent employees earn €900–€1,750 ($1,110–$2,158) a month, and 28.5% of self-employed workers earn more than €1,750 ($2,158) a month.\(^6\)

• Additionally, The Economic and Social Research Institute (IRES) found in a 2005–2006 survey: the average wage of permanent employees is €1,010 ($1,320) a month while employees on temporary contracts earn €800 ($986) a month. Among temporary workers, 59% of those working more than 40 hours a week earn less than €1,000 ($1,300) a month.\(^6\)

• As indicated in Figure 1, older employees (30%) agreed that their compensation was fair, in comparison to employees at midlife (31%) and younger employees (29%).\(^7\)

![Figure 1: Fair Compensation](source: EWCS (2005)\(^7\))

In this measure, the response given by the sum are “strongly disagree/disagree.”
II. Indicators of Opportunities for Development, Learning & Advancement

- Opportunities for the development of expanded skills and responsibilities are available.

- According to the 2006 Quality of Work Survey, learning opportunities are most prevalent in the services sector (83%) and in the public sector (84%). However, opportunities decline as company size increases—from 82%, in the case of companies with up to 15 employees, to 76%, for companies with more than 200 employees.

- The 2006 Quality of Work Survey revealed an increase, over time, in the proportion of temporary employees that have access to learning opportunities compared to others.

- According to the IRES 2005–2006 survey, 58% of workers reported that they have had training opportunities within their company. However, only 25% of all respondents reported that such opportunities were offered by the company, while 32.7% reported individual learning.

- As indicated in Figure 2, most employees do not believe that their jobs give them opportunities for development and learning. In particular, young employees do not support this idea. About 60% of younger employees and 57% of employees at midlife disagree that their jobs give them learning and growing opportunities.

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**Figure 2: Opportunities to Learn and Advance on the Job**

About 60% of younger employees, aged 35 and below, disagree that their jobs offer them opportunities for learning and growth. Employees at midlife, aged 35-49 disagree about 57%.
III. Indicators of Wellness, Health & Safety Protections

- **Well-being is promoted through workplace policies, and social protections are offered in case of illness.**

- According to the 2006 Quality of Work Survey, the working conditions for temporary employees proved to be very tough: 63% of these employees perform physically demanding tasks, compared with 59% of permanent employees and 40% of self-employed workers.\(^6\)

- Psychological stress is more likely to be reported among temporary employees reported (43%), compared with permanent employees (30%) and self-employed workers (38%).\(^6\)

- In general, across all ages groups, Italian employees do not think that their health and safety are at risk because of their job.\(^7\) (see Figure 3)

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**Figure 3: Is Health and Safety a Job Risk?**

![Graph showing health and safety job risk by age group](image)

Italian employees, across all age groups, do not have health and safety risks concerns in their employment.

Source: EWCS (2005)\(^7\)
IV. Indicators of Opportunities for Meaningful Work

*Opportunities for meaningful and fulfilling work are available.*

- A high percentage of Italian employees, regardless of age, think that there is a good match between their jobs and their abilities. Older employees (79%), employees at midlife (71%), and younger employees (60%), believe that their jobs give them an opportunity to do what they do best.\(^7\) (see Figure 4)

- Most Italian employees, across all age groups, have the feeling of doing useful work. This sentiment increases with age (from 73% among younger employees to 87% among those aged 50+).\(^7\) (see Figure 5)

**Figure 4: Employees Have the Opportunity to do “what they do best” on the Job**

[Graph showing percentages of employees who agree, neither, or disagree that they have the opportunity to do what they do best by age group.]

Source: EWCS (2005)\(^7\)

**Figure 5: Percent of Employees Who Feel that they are Accomplishing Useful Work**

[Graph showing percentages of employees who agree, neither, or disagree that they feel accomplishing useful work by age group.]

Source: EWCS (2005)\(^7\)
V. Indicators of Provisions for Employment Security & Predictabilities

- **Terms of employment are communicated clearly, with an emphasis on smooth transitions through jobs and careers.**

- In general, most employees in Italy do not think that they might lose their job in the next six months. Older employees (85%), employees at midlife (79%), and younger employees (69%) have a strong sense of employment security. (see Figure 6)

- Younger workers (16%) feel more at risk than older employees (6%).

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**Figure 6: Fear of Job Loss in the Next Six Months**

Most Italian employees have a sense of job security, although younger employees feel at risk.

Source: EWCS (2005)
VI. Indicators of Workplace Flexibility

- Options, choice, and control over work conditions and hours are available.

- According to the 2006 Quality of Work Survey, employees in Italy reported being satisfied and having sufficient time for various aspects of their private lives.\(^5\)

- According to the EWCS (2005), employees in Italy seem to think that their work schedule fits pretty well with their commitments outside work. Older employees (about 81\%), employees at midlife (69\%), and younger employees (72\%) agreed that work life and outside commitments did not conflict.\(^7\) (see Figure 7)

Work life and family/social commitments fit well, according to Italian employees.

Figure 7: Do Work-Family Conflicts Exists?

Source: EWCS (2005)\(^7\)
VII. Indicators of Culture of Respect, Inclusion & Equity

- Diversity, inclusion, and employee personal growth are valued.

- A majority of Italian employees reported feeling “at home” in their workplaces. Older employees (66%), employees at midlife (58%), and younger employees (55%) feel comfortable with work organizations. (see Figure 8)

Figure 8: Employees feel Comfortable with Their Work Organizations/Companies

Across all age groups, employees in Italy feel comfortable with their employers.

Source: EWCS (2005)
VIII. Indicators of Promotion of Constructive Relationships at the Workplace

Interactions with supervisors and coworkers are professional and respectful.

- Respondents were asked if assistance from superiors or bosses was forthcoming when requested. The majority of older employees (57%) maintained that they did not receive help from their superiors. Alternately, the majority of younger employees (42%) believed they did receive such assistance.7 (see Figure 9)

- Respondents were asked if they received assistance from colleagues when requested. More than half of younger employees (55%) maintained that they could receive assistance from their colleagues if needed. By contrast, older adults were split on whether they could receive assistance from colleagues, with 38% feeling they could and 38% feeling they could not.7 (see Figure 10)

Figure 9: Percent who Receive Assistance from Superior/Boss, if Requested

![Figure 9: Percent who Receive Assistance from Superior/Boss, if Requested](image)

Source: EWCS (2005)7

Figure 10: Percent Who Receive Assistance from Colleagues, if Requested

![Figure 10: Percent Who Receive Assistance from Colleagues, if Requested](image)

Source: EWCS (2005)7

Younger employees feel that assistance from superiors is forthcoming, if requested. Older workers, aged 50+ do not agree.

Younger employees in Italy overwhelmingly agree that they receive assistance from colleagues if requested, as opposed to other age groups (35-49; 50+ years).
CONCLUSION:

CLOSING THE GAP

In general, employees in Italy are not afraid of losing their jobs suddenly. However, this belief tends to have a positive relationship with age: younger workers feel more at risk than older ones. Employees in Italy believe that their jobs give them opportunities for development and learning. Specifically, younger employees support this idea, and this belief tends to be inversely related to age. Older employees maintain that they do not receive enough support from their superiors. On the contrary, younger workers consider their superiors more helpful.
ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

Established in 2007 by the Sloan Center on Aging & Work, the Global Perspectives Institute is an international collaboration of scholars and employers committed to the expansion of the quality of employment available to the 21st-century multi-generational workforce in countries around the world.

The Global Perspectives Institute focuses on innovative and promising practices that might be adopted by employers and policy-makers.

The Institute’s research, publications, and international forums contribute to:

- a deeper understanding of the employment experiences and career aspirations of employees of different ages who work in countries around the world;
- informed decision making by employers who want to be employers of choice in different countries; and
- innovative thinking about private-public partnerships that promote sustainable, high quality employment.

In addition to the Mind the Gap series, the Global Perspectives Institute publishes a Statistical Profile Series that highlights workforce demographic trends in different countries and a Global Policy Series that focuses on selected workforce policy in certain country contexts.

For more information on SCAW publications, please visit us online at:
www.bc.edu/agingandwork

The Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College promotes quality of employment as an imperative for the 21st-century multi-generational workforce. We integrate evidence from research with insights from workplace experiences to inform innovative organizational decision making. Collaborating with business leaders and scholars in a multi-disciplinary dialogue, the Center develops the next generation of knowledge and talent management.

The Sloan Center on Aging & Work is grateful for the continued support of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

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REFERENCES

1 For example, see:


2 For example, see:


5 Unfortunately, most of the research linking employer-of-choice strategies with business outcomes tends to focus on correlational relationships. Such studies do not definitively establish that being a “best place to work” causes positive organizational performance; indeed, it also might be true that high profits and strong financial growth cause higher employee engagement and foster perceptions that a particular workplace is an employer of choice.

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