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The Situation of Unemployed People Aged Over 50 in the Polish Job Market: Analysis of the Phenomenon From 2000 to 2020

Abstract: The article analyses changes in the unemployed population in the Polish job market from 2000 to 2020, focusing on people aged over 50. The analysis was based on two existing data sources: Statistics Poland and Eurostat. Empirical data were aggregated by gender to show the differentiation of this social problem between unemployed women and unemployed men. Statistical data clearly indicate that the share of people over 50 significantly increased in the unemployed population. It seems reasonable to argue that these people are disadvantaged in the dynamically changing job market. This group of the unemployed loses in the competition for vacancies with younger people, who are better adapted to the rapid changes in the job market. The article also reviews the laws prohibiting age discrimination in the job market. The author gives recommendations on how to improve the situation of the unemployed people aged over 50 in the job market, particularly in the face of ongoing technological changes.

Key words: unemployed, aged over 50, unemployment, job market, discrimination, Statistics Poland, Eurostat

Introduction

Although the situation in the Polish job market improved and the general trend of registered unemployment decreased from 20% in 2003 to 5.2% in late 2022 (see: stat.gov.pl), not all age categories of the unemployed benefited from these favourable changes to the same extent. Moreover, statistical analyses by both

Statistics Poland (GUS) and Eurostat clearly indicate that the share of people aged over 50 increased in the unemployed population. This problem is also noticeable in the literature on the subject (Czarnik & Turek, 2014; Wiktorowicz, 2014).

Progressive changes in the job market, especially related to the automation of production processes and the development of remote work, may negatively affect the professional reintegration of people aged over 50. In accordance with art. 49 of the Act on the promotion of employment and on job market institutions (Journal of Laws, 2011, item 1100, as amended), unemployed people in this age cohort are included as occupying “a special situation in the job market” (cf. Michajłow, 2016, p. 146). This status gives the unemployed the opportunity to use various services and instruments of vocational activation offered by public employment services, including from subsidised employment. However, as research indicates, although employers generally speak favourably about the work ethos of older people (Maksim et al., 2018, p. 9; Sygid & Cipora, 2020, pp. 233—324; Muster, 2020), they still prefer to employ younger people (see e.g., Muster, 2010). Piotr Szukalski points out that “most studies indicate that older employees perform their duties no worse, and sometimes better than their younger colleagues” (2006, p. 9). At the same time, the results of the analyses prove that older people have greater problems with vocational reintegration in the event of job loss (cf. Maksim et al., 2018, p. 10), and the dynamics of unemployment decline in this age cohort is clearly lower than among younger unemployed people (Michajłow, 2016, p. 157). Elżbieta Kryńska emphasises that this also results from their “low mobility (professional, educational, spatial, inter-enterprise), which reduces their ability to flexibly respond to changes taking place in modern economies and in modern job markets” (2012, pp. 14—15).

A significant problem in activating older unemployed people effectively is a deficit of digital and technological competences that increases with age (Spytek-Bandurska, 2012, p. 92; Michajłow, 2016, p. 146; Muster, 2019a, pp. 96—97). These factors may result in less interest in employing older people. Moreover, as the unemployed age, the amount of time they spend finding a job increases (Chirkowska-Smolak, 2000, p. 150; Muster, 2019b), which also adversely affects the situation of older people in the job market, who lose out in competing for jobs with more dynamic young people.

Nationwide research indicates that social awareness of the phenomenon of worse treatment of older people is quite widespread. Respondents often encounter poor or worse treatment of older people (Omyła-Rudzka, 2016). This applies to a wider area than just the job market. The results of empirical research also emphasise unfavourable stereotypes about how older people function in society (e.g., *Srebrna gospodarka* [Silver economy], 2019).

It should be emphasised that the law clearly prohibits discrimination against job candidates, including discrimination due to age. However, given the opportunity to choose between employing people up to 30 or those over 50, employers more often choose the former (see e.g., Muster, 2010). Given the growing share of unemployed people aged over 50 in the unemployed population, it seems justified to put forward the thesis that these people are disfavoured by employers in the job

market. Even if employers do not explicitly behave in a way that can be classified as direct discrimination (e.g., including age restrictions in job advertisements), it can be assumed that in some cases they do not consider potential candidates for vacancies due to their age.

The literature on the subject emphasises that “Discrimination is currently the subject of wide discussion in both public debate and scientific considerations” (Winiarska & Klaus, 2011, p. 9). One of its manifestations — age discrimination in the job market — is observed in Poland (e.g., Kłos, 2011). However, it seems that the issue of discrimination against the older unemployed population in the job market is not given due attention. The article attempts to fill this gap. The considerations presented here may contribute to further discussions on the deepening social problem of the growing share of people over 50 in the unemployed population.

The Problem of Technological Unemployment

Innovations in the production process reduce the demand for job resources (Witkowska, 2000, p. 37). The structure of demand for job resources is changing — in particular, demand for employees in the industrial sector is decreasing (see Hązła, 2022). These changes will lead to a deepening problem of technological unemployment. The literature on the subject reports that the high risk of technological unemployment may particularly concern people whose work is characterised by repetitive activities (Wieczorek, 2018, p. 99).

A study by Łukasz Arendt clearly indicates a decreasing share of employees performing routine (manual) tasks. The share of professionally active people who perform non-routine work is increasing in the unemployed population. While the share of people performing routine, repetitive work in 2004 was 62.2%, it decreased to 58.4% in 2010 and is expected to reach 47.5% in 2030 (Arendt, 2021, p. 12). These trends are also confirmed by the analyses of the Institute for Structural Research (Lewandowski & Hardy, 2018). It is emphasised that professions at risk of reduction due to technological transformation constitute over 30% of the job market in Poland. Therefore, we face the challenge of vocational retraining of millions of professionally active people (Wieczorek, 2018, p. 114). Moreover, the literature on the subject emphasises that the number of jobs will also decrease in the service sector due to technological development (Kośmicki & Malinowska, 2015, p. 10). In general, it can be expected that this will result in a decreasing demand for human resources. This will be particularly felt by people experiencing the problem of digital exclusion, which in turn is very clearly related to age and affects mainly older people.

Moreover, analysing statistical data shows that as the unemployed age, the probability of finding a job quickly decreases (Bieszk-Stolorz & Iwona Markowicz, 2013). In comparison to the younger unemployed, people aged over 50 take longer to find a job (Męcina, 2012, p. 81). This is clearly confirmed by data from Statistics

Poland (cf. GUS 2023). Based on the conducted analyses, Anna Turczak concludes that the time spent finding a job increases with the age of the unemployed, and in the case of the oldest unemployed (aged over 60), only every fifth person finds a job within three months (Turczak, 2016, p. 221).

It seems that, on the one hand, the deepening problems of older unemployed people result from changes in demand in the job market and, on the other, may be related to the problem of discrimination on the part of employers over access to job offers.

Age and Anti-Discrimination Provisions in Polish Legislation

Słownik języka polskiego [Dictionary of the Polish Language] defines the term “discrimination” (Latin: *discriminatio* = distinction) as “handicap or persecution of people due to their origin, class, nationality, race, religion, and so on” (1978, p. 488). It can be assumed that “discrimination is the opposite of equal rights” (Winiarska & Klaus, 2011, p. 10), and in the legal sense — as emphasised in the literature — “any unequal treatment is discrimination” (p. 12). The issue of discrimination is dealt with by representatives of various scientific disciplines, including sociologists, psychologists, educators and lawyers.

From a sociological perspective, discrimination is defined as “a form of unjustified unequal treatment characterised by long durability and purposefulness, the basis of which is the possession of a specific feature by a given person or group” (cf. Burek & Klaus, 2013, p. 75).

Among the most common forms of discrimination in the job market is ageism, which — as emphasised by A. Grześkowiak — consists of “unequal, worse treatment due to age. The English-language name introduced by R. Butler in 1969 functions in Polish literature” (Grześkowiak, 2012, p. 70). Polish law is clear in this respect: normative acts prohibit discrimination of job candidates due to age. This also applies to laws prohibiting discrimination in the workplace, including in promotion policies. At the same time, it should be emphasised that Poland’s accession to the European Union (EU) led to several legislative changes, also regarding the issue of discrimination in the job market. This is clearly emphasised in the literature on the subject, which emphasises that “The vast majority of anti-discrimination norms currently included in Polish legal provisions were introduced in connection with the obligations resulting from Poland’s membership in the European Union” (Burek & Klaus, 2013, pp. 82—83). The law relating to anti-discrimination provisions was amended in acts and implementing acts in the form of regulations. Importance may be attached to emerging legal provisions relating to job market policy, which prohibit discriminatory practices.

However, regardless of the legislative changes that were made after Poland's accession to the EU, anti-discrimination provisions have been present in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland for almost three decades (Journal of Laws of 1997, No. 78, item 483). This law refers to the need for equal treatment. Namely, art. 32.1 of the Basic Law states that "All persons shall be equal before the law. All persons shall have the right to equal treatment by public authorities." Art. 32.2 states that "No one shall be discriminated against in political, social or economic life for any reason whatsoever."

Several legal provisions prohibiting disadvantages in the job market are included in the Job Code (Journal of Laws of 1974, No. 24, item 141, as amended). One of the key provisions relating to the issue of discrimination (art. 183a § 1) says:

Employees should be treated equally as regards entering into and terminating the employment relationship, terms of employment, promotion and access to training in order to improve professional qualifications, in particular regardless of sex, age, disability, race, religion, nationality, political beliefs, trade union membership, ethnic origin, religion, sexual orientation, employment for a fixed or indefinite period, full-time or part-time employment.

The Act on the promotion of employment and on job market institutions (Journal of Laws of 2011, item 1100, as amended) is another normative Act that broadly addresses the issue of equal treatment in the job market. Art. 2a mentions the need to comply with the principles of equal treatment in access to and use of job market services and job market instruments, regardless of age. In turn, art. 36.4.3 states that job intermediation is carried out in accordance with the principles of equality, which means the obligation to provide all unemployed people and job seekers with assistance in finding employment or other gainful work, regardless of age, among others. However, art. 36.5(e) stipulates that a district employment office cannot accept a job offer if an employer includes in the job offer requirements that violate the principle of equal treatment in employment.

There is also art. 39 of the Labour Code, which emphasises that an employer cannot terminate the employment contract of an employee who is less than four years short of reaching retirement age if the period of employment enables them to obtain the right to a retirement pension upon reaching this age. This provision protects employees near retirement age against loss of employment, but it may also be a factor discouraging the employment of people who are within a few years of retirement age and making it difficult for them to obtain work. Legal provisions protecting "insiders," that is, employees, may also result in employers' reluctance to employ people of a certain age from the external job market (e.g., Sewastianowicz, 2004, pp. 20—23). Employers may fear that it will be difficult to dismiss this employee if they do not perform satisfactorily at work.

Unemployed People over 50 in the Polish Job Market

When analysing statistical data relating to changes in the situation of people aged over 50 in the Polish job market in the last 20 years, data from Eurostat and Statistics Poland (GUS) were used. According to Eurostat data (Tables 1 and 2), at the end of 2000, unemployed people aged over 50 in Poland constituted 9.8% of the total unemployed population. Statistical data clearly indicate that the number of unemployed people from this age cohort increased significantly in the following years. The analysis of Eurostat data shows that the share of these people in the unemployed population was almost twice as high in December 2007 as in 2000, and amounted to 17.6%. It should be emphasised that since 2007, almost every fifth unemployed person has been over 50. Aggregating the data by gender, the share of unemployed women aged over 50 in the unemployed population increased from 8.5% in 2000 to 15.8% in 2020 (i.e., by 85.9%), while the share of men in this age group increased in the same period from 11.1% to 19.9% (by 79.3%).

Table 1
Unemployed People Aged Over 50 in Poland Compared to the Total Unemployed
(According to Eurostat)

Specification	Years										
	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
Total unem- ployed (in thousands)	2,748.4	3,366.7	3,071.8	2,071.1	1,149.5	1,593.7	1,754.7	1,403.8	955.8	648.1	525.6
Unemployed over 50 (in thousands)	268.0	370.4	409.8	310.1	202.5	313.5	322.0	272.9	184.1	130.2	95.1
Share of the unemployed over 50 in the unemployed population (%)	9.8	11.0	13.3	15.0	17.6	19.7	18.4	19.4	19.3	20.1	18.1

Source: <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>.

A similar trend, a growing share of unemployed people aged over 50, is illustrated clearly by the data of Statistics Poland. However, according to this source, the number of both unemployed people and unemployed people from this age group in the overall unemployed population is higher than in Eurostat data. These differences result from different methodological approaches to calculating unem-

ployment rates.¹ It is also related to different ways of defining unemployed people. Statistics Poland includes as unemployed people participating in various forms of vocational activation programmes (e.g., internships, vocational preparation for adults, or training), which results in higher unemployment rates than in Eurostat data. Moreover, Eurostat data on unemployment rates are lower because they help capture the problem of the grey zone to some extent. The Job Force Survey (LFS) methodology makes it possible to identify people who, despite their formal unemployed status, have been or are currently working. These factors undoubtedly influence the lower unemployment rates measured using the LFS methodology applied by Eurostat.

Table 2

Share of Unemployed Women and Unemployed Men Aged Over 50
in the Total Unemployed Population (In %, According to Eurostat)

Specification	Years										
	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
Share of unemployed women over 50 in the unemployed population (%)	8.5	9.7	10.4	11.8	14.4	17.8	16.5	17.9	17.5	17.1	15.8
Share of unemployed men over 50 in the unemployed population (%)	11.1	12.2	16.2	18.3	21.1	21.4	20.2	20.9	20.7	22.7	19.9

Source: <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>.

Table 3 contains data from Statistics Poland relating to the problem of registered unemployment, showing the share of the unemployed aged over 50 in the unemployed population. Table 4 shows the share of the unemployed in this age group, aggregating the data by gender.

Regarding the gender of the unemployed, according to data from Statistics Poland, the share of unemployed women aged over 50 in the overall unemployed population increased from 6.6 in 2005 to 9.4% in 2020 (by 42.4%). However, the share of men of this age group in the overall unemployed population increased from 9.3 to 16.3% (by 75.3%).

¹ According to the announcement of the Central Statistical Office, data describing the phenomenon of unemployment in Poland comes from two sources: (1) From the registration of the unemployed in poviat labour offices — on this basis the registered unemployment rate is calculated with a monthly frequency at the end of the reporting period — which is the end of the month. (2) From the representative Labour Force Survey — LFS (the equivalent of the Labour Force Survey/LFS in the EU), which is conducted in Poland on a quarterly basis. The results collected in this survey allow to calculate the unemployment rate according to LFS published every quarter (see: <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/rynek-pracy/zasady-metodyczne-rocznik-pracy/jak-liczymy-bezrobocie,2,1.html>).

Table 3

Unemployed People Aged over 50 in Poland Compared to the Total Unemployed
(According to Statistics Poland)

Specification	Years								
	2005	2007	2009	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
Total unemployed (in thousands)	2773.0	1764.6	1892.7	1954.7	2136.8	1825.2	1335.2	968.9	1046.4
Unemployed over 50 (in thousands)	440.4	379.8	391.7	421.7	486.4	474.9	376.9	262.7	268.8
Share of the unemployed over 50 in the unemployed population (%)	15.9	21.5	20.7	21.6	22.8	26.0	28.2	27.1	25.7

Note: Owing to the availability of statistical data in public statistics regarding unemployed people aged over 50, Table 3 contains data from 2005.

Source: www.psz.praca.gov.pl.

Table 4

Share of Unemployed Women and Unemployed Men Aged Over 50 in the Total Unemployed (%),
(According to Statistics Poland)

Specification	Years								
	2005	2007	2009	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
Share of unemployed women over 50 in the unemployed population (%)	6.6	9.6	8.2	8.7	9.1	10.4	11.1	10.2	9.4
Share of unemployed men over 50 in the unemployed population (%)	9.3	11.9	12.5	12.9	13.7	15.6	17.1	16.9	16.3

Note: owing to the availability of statistical data in public statistics regarding unemployed people aged over 50, Table 4 contains data from 2005.

Source: www.psz.praca.gov.pl.

Regardless of differences in statistical data on unemployment (GUS vs Eurostat), an increase in the share of people aged over 50 among the unemployed is clearly visible. According to official statistical data, every fourth unemployed person in Poland (25.7%) was over 50 at the end of 2020.

Undoubtedly, attention should be paid to the growing problem of vocational activation of representatives of this age cohort. Unemployed people aged over 50 take much longer to find a job than the unemployed aged under 30.

The analysis of empirical data indicates clearly that the situation of older people in the job market is deteriorating. We observe that their reintegration into the job market is increasingly difficult. Impeding the access of people aged over 50 to job offers is a particularly dangerous phenomenon. It is even more dangerous considering the growing problems that these people face when entering the job market.

The literature on the subject emphasises that if discrimination is initiated and is not limited as a phenomenon, it will show an intensifying tendency and will

escalate (see e.g., Winiarska & Klaus, 2011; Domańska, 2019). Given the progressing automation and robotisation of production processes, and the increasing importance of remote work using modern information transmission technologies, deepening problems with the reintegration of older unemployed people into the job market can be expected. It is related to the problem of digital exclusion of some unemployed people, which clearly correlates with the age criterion and concerns mainly older people.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In recent years, unemployment rates in the Polish job market have declined. The global COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on the economy might have been expected to increase unemployment rates significantly, but unemployment has not increased in the domestic job market. This can be interpreted as a beneficial impact of various anti-crisis shields that employers used to protect jobs. If employers needed to reduce employee numbers, they first gave up the services of pupils and students studying full-time who could not formally register at district employment offices (these workers were often foreigners who returned to their countries of origin if their contract was not renewed).

Even if unemployed people aged 50 and over are not directly discriminated against in the job market, their growing share in the unemployed population may indicate that they are disadvantaged in their access to job offers. Although the law prohibits discrimination against job candidates due to age, younger job candidates have more chance of being employed. Unemployed older people lose the competition for vacant jobs to younger people who are better adapted to the realities of the modern job market in their IT competences, knowledge of foreign languages, level of formal education and spatial and vocational mobility.

To improve the situation of unemployed people aged over 50 in the job market, several actions can be recommended:

- conducting cyclical research assessing the situation of these people in the job market (including barriers to vocational activation);
- evaluating the effectiveness of implemented socio-professional activation projects;
- building a multi-layered model of vocational and social activation considering the specificity of these people in the context of functioning in the job market (developing job market services and instruments adapted to the capabilities of people over 50 and to the expectations of employers);
- training unemployed people from this age category in the use of computers and the Internet, which should reduce the problem of digital exclusion;
- making legislative changes that encourage employers to employ these people;

- taking actions aimed at improving the image of this age category in the job market, particularly among employers;
- informing employers about anti-discrimination regulations relating to employment;
- allocating more financial resources for their socio-professional activation (using both national and EU funds);
- developing and implementing age management programmes in companies and institutions.

It can be assumed that the situation of older people in the job market will change. Considering the decreased availability of job resources and the increasing ageing in society, more interest from employers in employing people aged over 50 can be expected. This will also result in employees working more often in generationally diverse teams (see e.g., Rogozińska-Pawełczyk, 2014; Wiktorowicz & Warwas, 2016; Hysa, 2016; Kawka, 2018; Muster, 2020). Therefore, a significant challenge for organisations — particularly for HR departments — will be to implement age management procedures in organisations (see e.g., Liwiński & Sztanderska, 2010; 2013). The beneficiaries of this type of activity will not only be unemployed older people interested in taking up work, but also the employees of these entities.

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