

# Actual versus Preferred Work Status in Older Workers: Findings from the New Zealand Health, Work and Retirement Study

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## INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen a significant increase in labour force participation by older workers, particularly by women and those aged over 65 years. Decisions around work continuation are influenced by financial preparedness for retirement and health status. Also thought to play a part in the work-retirement transition process are work histories, and historically these differ between men and women. For many older workers, employment preferences are not realised and this may impact on psychological and financial well-being in later life.

## METHOD

### Participants:

The sample of 1,458 New Zealanders (aged 55 to 70) was taken from the Health, Work and Retirement (HWR) study<sup>1</sup>. Participants from two waves of the study completed surveys in 2006 and 2008.

### Measures:

**Demographic Variables:** Age, gender, education, economic living standards and current and preferred work status were measured. Work history variables included number of jobs held since 18 years old, years in the paid workforce and longest time in one job.

**Health Quality of Life Variables:** These measures were derived from the SF-36 Health Survey<sup>2</sup>. This is a widely used, valid and reliable short form measure of functional health and wellbeing. The SF-36 has 36 items and provides scores on eight health subscales. These subscales were combined using principal components derived coefficients to form two summary components assessing physical and mental health: the Physical Component Summary score (PCS) and the Mental Component Summary score (MCS).

**Quality of Work Life Variables:** These measures included career commitment<sup>3</sup>, career satisfaction<sup>4</sup>, job satisfaction<sup>5</sup>, work involvement<sup>6</sup>, work stress<sup>7</sup>, work social support<sup>8</sup>, and leisure orientation.

## FINDINGS

**Sample:** Participants were aged 55 to 70 at wave 1 (2006) with a mean of 61 years (sd=4.52). Fifty-two per cent were women. Those with no educational qualifications comprised 31.5% of the sample with 21.6% having secondary qualifications, and 46.9% tertiary educational qualifications. Participants were categorised as matched (performing the level of work they desired, N=1053), under-employed (not performing as much work as they desired, N=98) or over-employed (performing more work than they desired, N=307) according to their preferred and actual work status at time 2 (Full-time, Part-time or Retired).

The under-employed at time 2 reported the lowest economic living standards at time 1. There were no differences on Physical Health scores between the three groups at time 1 or time 2. However, the over-employed had significantly lower Mental Health scores compared to the matched group at time 1, and at time 2 Mental Health scores were significantly different between all three groups with the matched group reporting the highest scores and the under-employed the lowest (see Figure 1). Differences in quality of work life were seen between the matched group and the over-employed, with the latter group having significantly lower scores on career commitment, career satisfaction and work involvement, and lower reported levels of leisure orientation at time 1. The under-employed had higher levels of career commitment and work involvement than the over-employed at time 1. Men reported more stable work histories, however, gender was not related to work status groupings at time 2. Men reported more stable work histories (spending more years in paid employment and a longer time in their lengthiest job employment period), however gender was unrelated to work status groupings at time 2.

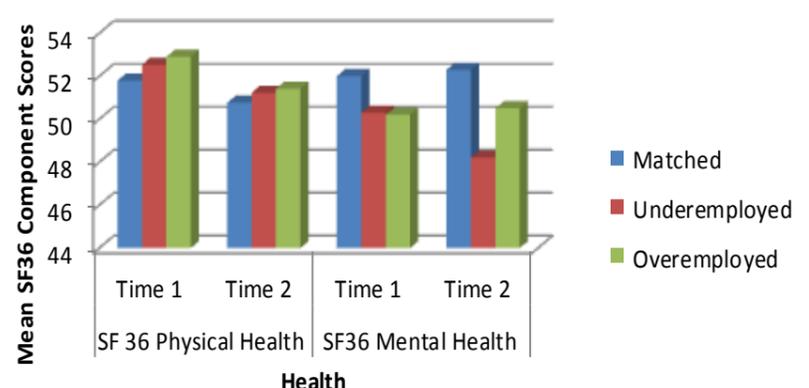
A multinomial logistic regression was undertaken of these significant variables at time 1 on work status at 2 WITH THE "Matched" group as the reference group (see Table 1 for odd ratios and CIs). Economic living standards, SF-36 mental health, leisure orientation and longest time in job remained significant when controlling for other significant univariate predictors. Those who had higher living standards and better mental health had significantly lower odds of being under or over-employed compared to the reference group of "Matched" work status participants. Those with a higher leisure orientation and those who had spend a longer time in one job had significantly higher odds of been over-employed compared to the "Matched" participants.

Realising employment preferences in later life was achieved by 72% of our sample, however financial considerations, health, quality of work life and work histories appear to be related to a mismatch between actual and preferred work status.

Table 1  
Logistic regression Time 1 demographics, work QoL and health variables by work status category. "Matched" are the reference group.

	Under-employed	Over-employed
Economic Living Standards	<b>0.93 (0.89-0.97)</b>	<b>0.97 (0.94-0.99)</b>
SF36 Mental Health	<b>0.95 (0.92-0.97)</b>	<b>0.97 (0.96-0.99)</b>
Career Commitment	0.95 (0.74-1.20)	0.92 (0.79-1.05)
Career Satisfaction	1.06 (0.84-1.33)	0.91 (0.80-1.05)
Work Involvement	1.21 (0.82-1.78)	0.95 (0.74-1.21)
Leisure Orientation	0.85 (0.58-1.21)	<b>2.46 (1.90-3.19)</b>
Years in Paid Workforce	0.99 (0.97-1.02)	1.01 (0.99-1.02)
Longest Time in One Job	1.02 (0.99-1.04)	<b>1.02 (1.01-1.03)</b>

Figure 1: Health x Work Status (T2)



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2012-05-30

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