

# Remaining active in the labour market: Trends and characteristics of the over 50s

## Research Article

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**Abstract:** Drawing on the Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS), this paper examines changes in the proportion of people aged over 50, active in the Irish labour market from 1998 to 2014. Results indicate that an increasing number of workers over 50 remain active, due mainly to the dramatic increase in the proportion of older females remaining in the labour force. By 2014 the 50 to 64 age group accounted for a quarter of all economically active people in the labour market between 15 and 64. Older workers are more likely to be employees and less likely to be employers or self-employed in 2014 compared to 1998. Older workers in lower-level occupations, particularly over the age of 60, are more likely to remain economically active. Level of education is strongly associated with the likelihood of older workers remaining economically active, particularly for the 50-59 age group and for females. .

**Keywords:** *over 50s; labour market; economically active*

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## INTRODUCTION

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an 'early exit' retirement culture was pervasive among the developed industrial societies (Taylor, 2013). Yet, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most developed industrialised countries are steadily increasing the age for eligibility for the state employment pension. A central driver of this change is the increasing cost of state pensions, as people live longer and hence claim for an ever longer period of retirement. Longevity in Ireland has risen substantially in recent years. Life expectancy for males at birth in 1951 was almost 65 years for men and 67 for females, while by 2011 life expectancy reached 78 years for males and 83 for females. Over future decades, population ageing will induce a substantial 'greying' of the working age population in OECD countries. Increasing the labour force and employment of older workers, not least by raising effective retirement ages, could help alleviate the burden of ageing populations by increasing output and curbing rises in spending on old-age pensions, while at the same time generating higher tax revenues to finance them. Indeed, there is evidence that higher labour force participation of older workers would be welfare-enhancing in many countries (Duval, 2003). It is hoped that in the future more people will work until state pension age and beyond, and indeed in many countries state pension ages are rising (OECD, 2011).

Aside from the economic argument, there is a substantial literature extolling the benefits of a longer working life. Work is perceived as a central part of a person's sense of self and identity, with substantial social as well as economic rewards. A longer and healthier life has created a set of positive conditions conducive to working beyond the traditional retirement age of 60 or 65. While there is no agreement on a definition of an 'older' worker, there is a broadly shared view that, in the workplace context at least, one becomes identified as 'older' somewhere between the chronological ages of 50 and 55 years of age (McCarthy et al., 2014). In this paper, older workers are defined as those economically active in the labour market between the age of 50 and 64 (the customary retirement age is 65). In Ireland, eligibility for the contributory state pension increased from 65 to 66 in 2014 and is due to rise to 67 in 2021 and 68 in 2028. The changes to the contributory state pension assume that the proportion of people economically active in the labour market over the age of 50 and particularly 60 will increase substantially in the coming years. Yet, no systematic empirical evidence is available to guide policy in this area.

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Drawing on data from the Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS), we first examine the trends in the participation rate of older workers economically active in the Irish labour market at three points in time 1998, 2007 and 2014. This allows us to assess the impact of the financial crisis in 2008. Unemployment increased dramatically after 2008, reaching nearly 15 per cent in 2012, and possibly leading to an increase in the retirement of older workers (Coile and Levine, 2007). Older job seekers who experience difficulties finding work are even more likely to retire earlier than expected compared to older employed workers (Coile and Levine, 2011; Marmora and Ritter, 2015). Secondly, we examine the impact of gender, education and occupation on the likelihood of workers over 50 remaining active in the labour market.

## Why older workers remain economically active

Leisure time in general has increased, particularly in European countries, since the 1960s (Aguiar and Hurst, 2007; Freeman and Schettkat, 2005). For many older workers over 50, depending on their economic circumstances, there is increasingly a potential choice between remaining economically active or retiring and exiting the labour market. Older workers who remain economically active are likely to do so either through economic necessity or because they value the income gains from work over the availability of extra leisure time.

A number of economic and sociological factors can be identified that likely influence older people's decision to remain economically active. Economic explanations focus on the time preferences of individuals with regard to the trade-off between income and leisure (Becker, 1965; Ghez and Becker, 1975). Rational individuals are assumed to want to maximise the things they enjoy most. The trade-off between work as a source of income and leisure means that the more people work, the less leisure time available to them. Older workers are more likely to exit the labour market where leisure time is valued more highly than the opportunity for extra income. Alternatively, where older workers value maximising earnings over extra leisure time, the more likely they are to remain active in some capacity in the labour market. Sociological explanations dwell on the intrinsic rewards of work. Preferences to remain economically active may stem from intrinsic satisfaction gained from the nature of the work and associated social community at work. A number of sociological factors may make work more attractive and encourage individuals to remain economically active as they age. Workers may be influenced in their preferences for work that conveys high status and provides a community of work colleagues in the workplace with whom they identify strongly. There is some evidence to show that older employees, compared to younger employees, put more emphasis on good relationships with colleagues, while income, advancement opportunities, job security and having an interesting job are less important (Drabe et al., 2015).

For older women, the decision to remain active in the labour market is also likely to be influenced by family commitments, especially those of a caring nature. Loretto and Vickerstaff (2015) argue that there has been a remarkable lack of attention paid to the role of gender in extending working lives. Firstly, there is little consideration of the relationship between gender and flexible working beyond the child-caring phase of life. Secondly, there is a tendency to assume that the end of working life and retirement are gender-neutral (see also Calasanti, 1996; Wright and Soutter, 2015). Based on a qualitative study of people aged 50+ in the UK, Loretto and Vickerstaff (2015) challenge some of the key assumptions underpinning the utility of flexible work in extending working lives, and suggest that the ways in which working in later life is constructed and enacted is different for men and women.

## Research focus

Given the cross-sectional nature of the QNHS data, it is not possible to establish causal linkages with any certainty. Our results therefore describe associations between measures and should be considered contingent and exploratory. Moreover, the QNHS dataset lacks measures that directly test respondent preferences for either greater income returns or extra leisure. Direct measures are also absent for assessing the role and influence of intrinsic work satisfaction and social networks in the choices of older workers to remain in the labour market. Consequently, in the following analysis, occupational level is used as a proxy for both the economic and sociological factors that influence individual preferences. Higher-level occupations such as the professions tend to be associated with both high instrumental rewards and interesting and high-quality work. Low-level occupations tend to be jobs associated with uninteresting work, poor working conditions and low extrinsic rewards. Thus, we examine (i) whether workers in higher-level occupations are more likely to remain economically active over the age of 50.

A preference to exit the labour market or remain inactive may arise from a higher value placed on leisure than income, particularly where economic circumstances are favourable, such as the availability of pension entitlements and early retirement opportunities. Workers in higher-level occupations are more likely to be in more financially

favourable circumstances with pension entitlements than workers in lower-level occupations. In contrast, the economic circumstances of those in lower-level occupations may preclude them from early retirement from the labour market. These advantages for higher-level occupations will be particularly salient for older workers over the age of 60. Thus, it may be the case that (ii) older workers in lower-level occupations, particularly over the age of 60, are more likely to remain economically active than workers in higher-level occupations.

Few older men appear to avail of flexible work options, particularly part-time working. Most men work full time and then retire, with little evidence for gradual retirement (Hofacker, 2010). The most common form of flexibility is part-time working and women are markedly more likely to have worked part time across their life-course (Hofacker and Konig, 2013). Accordingly (iii) males over 50 are likely to have significantly lower levels of part-time working than women over 50.

Many women modify their hours in later life to undertake caring for elderly parents, an ailing partner, or grandchildren (Loretto and Vickerstaff, 2015). Such flexible work is often associated with low-skilled, low-paid jobs, with few prospects, particularly for the over-60s in Anglo-Saxon countries (Kalleberg et al., 2000; Lain, 2012; McGovern et al., 2004). For many women, there may be a strong propensity to escape into retirement if at all affordable, compared to men in full-time work. Indeed, it has been argued that part-time working in practice may actually inhibit temporal flexibility on the part of the employees, who feel they have to be available 'on-call' all the time (Dick, 2010; Rigby and O'Brien-Smith, 2010). As a result, we examine (iv) whether women over the age of 50 are more likely to exit the labour market than men over 50.

Moreover, many married, economically active women over 50 may still carry out a disproportionate share of domestic duties, particularly where children remain in the family unit (Gangel and Ziefle, 2009; Hakim, 2002; Yee Kan, 2007). Indeed, in the QNHS 2014, nearly 30 per cent of women in the 50 to 64 age group reported their main status as engaged in 'home duties', compared to only 0.5 per cent of men.<sup>1</sup> Such responsibilities may provide an incentive for women to retire from work. Thus (v), married women, particularly where children remain in the family unit, are more likely to exit the labour market than single women. By contrast, married men, particularly where children remain in the family unit, are more likely than single men to remain active in the labour market both because of the absence of onerous domestic duties and the possibility of extra demands where children remain part of the family unit.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data analysed comes from the micro data file of the QNHS. This is a large-scale, nationwide survey of households in Ireland designed to produce quarterly labour force estimates that include the official measure of employment and unemployment in the State. The survey began in September 1997, replacing the annual April Labour Force Survey (LFS). A field force, comprising 12 field co-ordinators and 152 field interviewers, interview 39,000 households each quarter. To explore the characteristics of older people, both economically active and inactive, we rely on the QNHS at three different points: 1998 (Q2), 2007 (Q2) and 2014 (Q4). This allows a comparison between 1998 and 2014, a period of 16 years, and any possible effects from the financial crisis in 2008. All descriptive data and regressions are run using the QNHS micro data.

The focus in this paper is confined to people of working age (between 15 and 64) who are either employed or actively looking for work. The participation rate of economically active is the number of people in the labor force divided by the size of the adult population between the ages of 15 and 64. People economically active are calculated here using the main International Labour Organisation (ILO) employment status measure.<sup>2</sup> Active people are categorised as: being in full-time work; being in part-time work; seeking full-time employment/future job starters/seeking employment as self-employed; seeking part-time employment.

Occupation is a central measure used in our analysis. The Central Statistics Office categorises jobs hierarchically, using the UK standard occupational classification, into nine broad occupational groupings: (1) managers/senior administrator occupations; (2) professional; (3) associate professional; (4) clerical and secretarial; (5) craft and related; (6) personal and protective services; (7) sales; (8) plant and machine operatives; and (9) other. For reasons

<sup>1</sup> Responses are based on the International Labour Organisation (ILO) measure of respondent's main status, as follows: 'At work'; 'Unemployed'; 'Student'; 'Retired'; 'Unable to work due to disability/sick'; 'On home duties'; 'Other'.

<sup>2</sup> An alternative measure used to calculate the economically active is to use the respondents' main status, which classifies people as active in the labour market by combining the 'at work' and the 'unemployed'. We believe the ILO measure to be a more sensitive measure and the number returned as economically active using the ILO measure is slightly higher than the 'main status' measure.

of parsimony, the nine occupational groups are aggregated into three main occupational groups in our analysis as follows:

1. Higher professional-level occupations composed of: (i) managers/senior; (ii) professional occupations; and (iii) associate professional jobs;
2. Middle-level occupations composed of: (i) administrative/routine white collar jobs; and (ii) craft and technically skilled occupations;
3. Lower-level occupations composed of: (i) personal and protective services; (ii) sales (iii); plant and machine operatives; and (iv) other (usually manual jobs).

## Economically active persons aged 50 to 64

Between 1998 and 2014, the labour market participation rate of the 50 to 64 age cohort increased from 52 to 66 per cent of all eligible people, driven in the main by the substantial increase in the participation rate of females in this age category (Table 1). Most of the increase occurred between 1998 and 2007. Disaggregating the older workers into five yearly groups indicates a general increase in each category of the economically active between 1998 and 2014. However, the proportion of people active in the labour market declined significantly between the ages of 50 and 65. In 2014, 77 per cent of the 50 to 54s were active compared to 69 per cent of the 55 to 59s and 48 per cent or less than half of the 60 to 64s. Over the period 1998 to 2014, there was a small overall increase (of four percentage points) in those economically active in the 65 to 69 category comprised of an increase of three percentage point for males and seven for females. Even so, slightly less than a fifth of the 65 to 69 age group were economically active in 2014.

Males are significantly more likely to participate in the labour market than females. Nevertheless, the rate of increase in the participation of women from 31 per cent in 1998 to 55 per cent in 2014 is substantially greater than the change for men from 72 to 76 per cent by 2014. The financial crisis in 2008 slowed the rate of increase, with a modest rise, from 2007 to 2014, of three per cent, solely as a result of increased female participation. The increase in the participation rate for men in all age categories between 1998 and 2014 was positive, though relatively modest. In 2014, the proportion active in the 50 to 54 age group was 87 per cent, 79 per cent in the 55 to 59 age group, and 59 per cent in the 60 to 64 age group. By contrast, there was a significant increase in the proportion of women active in each age category between 1998 and 2014. The proportion of economically active females increased, between 1998 and 2014, from 42 to 67 per cent in the 50 to 54 age group and 30 to 58 per cent in the 55 to 59 category, and more than doubled from 17 to 38 per cent among the 60 to 64s. There appears to be no support for the proposition that women over the age of 50 are more likely to exit the labour market than men over 50. In 2014, the fall in the proportion of economically active males and females over the three age categories from 50 to 64 was relatively similar.

**Table 1.** People active in the labour market 1998 and 2014 (includes the employed and unemployed)

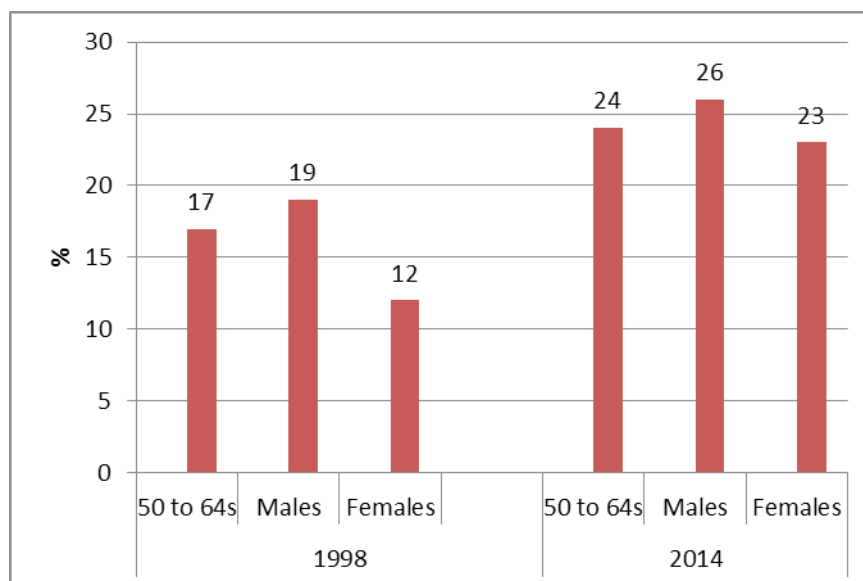
Active in labour force*					Men				Women			
	1998	2007	2014	1998 to 2014	1998	2007	2014	1998 to 2014	1998	2007	2014	1998 to 2014
Age	%	%	%		%	%	%		%	%	%	
50-64	52	63	66	+14	72	76	76	+4	31	49	55	+24
50-54	64	75	77	+13	85	87	87	+2	42	64	67	+25
55-59	51	63	69	+18	72	78	79	+7	30	49	58	+18
60-64	35	46	48	+13	53	61	59	+6	17	31	38	+21
65-69	15	19	19	+4	24	27	27	+3	5	10	12	+7

\* Q2 QNHS surveys in 1998 and 2007; Q4 used in 2014.

In 1998 the 50 to 64 age group accounted for 17 per cent of all economically active persons in the labour market between the ages of 15 and 64 increasing to 24 per cent by 2014 or just over half a million workers (Fig. 1). While

the proportion of males increased by 6 percentage points between 1998 and 2014, females in the 50 to 64 age category increased by 11 percentage points. Thus by 2014 males accounted for 26 per cent of all economically active males between the ages of 50 and 64 and females for 23 per cent of all females participating in the labour market in the age range 15 to 64.

Comparatively an increase in the older workers occurred in the 27 countries comprising the European Union (EU) with the exception of Romania and Portugal between 2000 and 2010 in the 55 to 64 age group (Eurofound, 2012). By 2010 Ireland recorded above average rates of participation for the 60 to 64s and about average rates for the 55 to 59s (Eurofound, 2012). However, based on OECD figures Irish males and females had above the average participation rates for the original EU15 in 2010 (Taylor, 2013: 3-5).



**Figure 1.** 50 to 64 age group as a proportion of all the economically active people from 15 to 64

### Characteristics of those remaining economically active

This section examines the characteristics of the 50 to 64 age cohort who are economically active. Employers, as a proportion of the economically active in the 50 to 64 age category, declined between 1998 and 2014 from 11 per cent in 1998 to 7 per cent in 2014 (Table 2). The proportion of self-employed people active in the labour market also declined for this age group from 22 to 17 per cent in the same period, while the proportion of employees active in the labour market increased from 67 to 76 per cent. Thus, those classed as employees increased substantially as a proportion of the economically active in the 50 to 64 age group. As a proportion of the economically active, employees aged 50 to 54 increased from 71 to 80 per cent between 1998 and 2014, 66 to 76 per cent in the 55 to 59 group and 57 to 67 per cent in the 60 to 64 category. Even so, those classed as employers and self-employed tended to increase as a proportion of the economically active in the older age categories, particularly in 1998. Overall, the trends indicate that increasingly, older workers are more likely to be employees and less likely to be employers or self-employed in 2014, compared to 1998.

In Table 3, occupations are sorted into three main groups: professional jobs, routine white-collar and skilled jobs, and lower-service and manual-type jobs. Professional-type jobs for all the economically active from 15 to 64 increased from 36 to 38 per cent between 1998 and 2014; middle-level jobs remained stable; and service/manual-type jobs declined from 38 to 36 per cent. However, the trend among the 50 to 64s reflects a different pattern, with professional-type jobs within this age category decreasing from 47 to 35 per cent of all occupations. However, middle-level jobs as a proportion of all jobs increased from 19 per cent in 1998 to 31 per cent in 2014, while service/manual-type jobs remained at 34 per cent over this period. This provides scant support for the suggested proposition that workers in higher-level occupations are more likely to remain economically active over the age of 50. Indeed,

while the proportion active in lower-level occupations remained stable, the -proportion active in professional type jobs declined by a significant amount.

In 2014, the decline in the proportion of professional-type jobs was greatest for the 60 to 64 age category. The proportion in middle-level jobs increased substantially, while the proportion of service/manual jobs also increased moderately with age, in 2014. These patterns provide some support for the alternative position that older workers in lower-level occupations, particularly over the age of 60, are more likely to remain economically active than workers in higher-level occupations.(though not to the same extent as middle-level occupations).

**Table 2.** Employees, the self-employed and employers between 50 and 64 active in the labour market, 1998 and 2014

Age	Employer			Self-employed			Employees		
	1998	2014	Trend	1998	2014	Trend	1998	2014	Trend
			1998-2014			1998-2014			1998-2014
	%	%		%	%		%	%	
50-64	11*	7	-4	22	17	-5	67	76	+9
50-54	10	6	-4	19	14	-5	71	80	+9
55-59	11	7	-4	23	17	-6	66	76	+10
60-64	13	9	-4	30	24	-6	57	67	+10

\*Percentage refers to the proportion of people who are employers in the 50-64 category and are active in the labour market in 1998. The percentages sum to 100 across the table for 1998.

**Table 3.** Occupational shares, 1998 and 2014

	Professional			White collar/skilled			Service/Manual		
	1998	2014	Trend	1998	2014	Trend	1998	2014	Trend
	%	%		%	%		%	%	
15 - 64	36	38	+2	26	26	0	38	36	-2
50 - 64	47	35	-12	19	31	+12	34	34	0
50 - 54	44	36	-8	21	29	+8	35	35	0
55 - 59	48	36	-12	17	31	+14	35	33	-2
60 - 64	53	29	-24	17	35	+18	29	36	+7

## Flexible working patterns

It is generally held that older workers favour more flexible forms of work as they move towards retirement. The most common form of flexible work is part-time working. The trend in part-time working has increased for the 50 to 64 age category from 21 per cent of employees (excluded are employers and the self-employed) in 1998 to 28 per cent in 2014 (Table 4). This increase is associated with a rise in the proportion of men working part time from 8 to 13 per cent while the proportion of women remained relatively stable at just over 40 per cent.

Part-time working tends to be highest for the 60 to 64 age group, rising from 26 per cent of the 50 to 59s to 29 per cent for the 60 to 64s. For men, there was a steady increase across the age categories from 9 per cent for the 50 to 54s to 21 per cent for the 60 to 64s in 2014. By 2014, over 50 per cent of female employees in the 60 to 64 age group worked part time – an increase of six percentage points since 1998. Part-time work remains overwhelmingly female, despite the modest increase of older men working part time, particularly in the over 60s.

**Table 4.** Gender and part-time work, 1998 to 2014 (employees only)

	Part-time employees			Male part-time			Female part-time		
	1998 %	2014 %	Trend	1998 %	2014 %	Trend	1998 %	2014 %	Trend
50 - 64	21	28	+7	8	13	+5	43	42	-1
50 - 54	21	26	+5	8	9	+1	42	41	-1
55 - 59	21	26	+5	9	13	+4	42	38	-4
60 - 64	23	29	+6	10	21	+11	49	55	+6

### Gender, education, marital status and remaining economically active

In Table 5, binary logistic regression is used to explore the impact of gender, education and marital status on the probability as measured by the odds ratio of people remaining economically active in the labour market over the age of 50, based on the 2014 QNHS dataset. Education is measured using six different levels: (1) primary or lower level of education (the referent measure); (2) Junior Certificate level; (3) Leaving Certificate level; (4) post-Leaving Certificate; (5) higher certificates and diplomas; and (6) higher-education levels (honours degrees and postgraduate degrees, including PhDs). Controlling for different levels of education and marital status men are over three times more likely to remain in the labour market than women in the 50 to 64 age group. In general, increasing levels of education are associated with a greater likelihood of being active in the labour market. Compared to those with primary/lower education, respondents with a degree or a higher qualification are over five times more likely to be active, and those with higher certificates and diplomas are almost four times more likely to be active. In particular, higher levels of education have a greater impact for women than men on the likelihood of remaining active in the labour market. Women with higher-level qualifications are almost seven times more likely to be active, compared to females with primary/lower education, while males are four times more likely to be active. Females with a post-Leaving Certificate qualification are five times more likely to be active, compared to females with primary/lower-level education, while males are only twice as likely to be active.

For the discrete age categories, and controlling for education and marital status, men are five times more likely than women to be active in the 50 to 54 age group, and those with a higher level of education are almost 13 times more likely to be active than respondents with only primary/lower education. However, the impact of education, and to a lesser extent gender, declines for the 55 to 59s and particularly the 60 to 64 age group. Indeed, higher levels of education have no significant effect on the likelihood of people remaining active in the labour market, compared to respondents with primary/low educational levels for the 60 to 64 age group. It appears that those with higher-educational levels are more likely to exit the labour market between 60 and 64 at a faster rate than respondents with Junior- to post-Leaving Certificate levels of education.

In Table 5, marital status and children remaining in the family unit are used to measure family responsibilities. Being married has no significant impact on the likelihood of remaining active in the labour market for the 50 to 64 age group. However, the presence of any children remaining in the family unit increases moderately (1.5 times) the likelihood of remaining economically active. Married women, compared to single/widowed women in the 50 to 64 age group, are less likely to remain economically active, though the relationship is relatively weak (-1.3 times), while married men, compared to single men, are 1.6 times more likely to remain active. The presence of children in the family unit increases the probability of men remaining active (1.8 times) to a greater extent than for women (1.2 times). Thus, it appears that there is some support for the proposition that married women are more likely to exit the labour market than single/widowed women; though the presence of children in the family unit has a modest positive, rather than negative, impact on the likelihood of remaining active. By contrast, married men in the 50 to 64 age group with children remaining in the family unit are more likely to stay active in the labour market.

Across the three discrete age categories 50 to 54, 55 to 59 and 60 to 64, there is no significant relationship between being married and having children in the family unit and the probability of remaining active in the labour market.



**Table 5.** Association between education, gender, being married, having children, and remaining active (QNHS, 2014) (Dependent variable: 1=Remaining active; 0=Not active. Odds ratios and significance reported in the table).

	Binary logistic regression					
	50 to 64	50-64	50- 64	50 to 54	55 to 59	60 to 64
	All	Female	Males	All	All	All
Being male	3.2**	/	/	5.0**	3.4**	2.7**
Junior Certificate	1.7**	1.4**	2.1**	1.8**	1.8**	1.2**
Leaving Certificate	2.9**	3.2**	2.7**	2.7**	3.7**	2.1**
Post-Leaving education	3.7**	5.3**	1.9**	7.9**	3.6**	1.5*
Higher certs/ diplomas	3.9**	5.0**	2.7**	7.1**	5.2**	1.4 (ns)
Higher educational levels	5.5**	6.8**	4.1**	12.7**	6.9**	1.7 (ns)
Referent: primary / lower education						
Being married <sup>a</sup>	1.0 (ns)	-1.3*	1.6**	0.89(ns)	1.0(ns)	0.8 (ns)
Having children <sup>b</sup>	1.5**	1.2**	1.8**	1.9(ns)	1.1(ns)	1.2(ns)
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.16	0.12	0.07	0.21	0.17	0.1
Chi.Sq.	881**	350**	166**	427**	310**	164**
% correctly predicted	70%	65%	79%	78%	74%	63%
N (unweighted)	7385	3786	3599	2841	2436	2108

Significance levels: \* &lt; .01 \*\* &lt; .001

ns = not significant

<sup>a</sup> Married respondents, compared to single/widowed<sup>b</sup> Respondents with children of any age still in the household

## CONCLUSION

Between 1998 and 2014, those classed as employees increased substantially as a proportion of the economically active in the 50 to 64 age group, while the self-employed and employers declined as a proportion of the labour force. Overall, the trends indicate that older workers were more likely to be employees and less likely to be employers or self-employed in 2014, compared to 1998. Increasingly, a greater proportion of workers over the age of 50 remained active in the labour market, increasing from 52 per cent in 1998 to 66 per cent in 2014. Although males were more likely to remain active, there was a dramatic increase in the proportion of older females remaining in the labour force. In 2014, the fall in the proportion of economically active males and females over the three age categories from 50 to 64 was relatively similar. Consequently, there was no evidence that women over the age of 50 were more likely to exit the labour market than men over 50. Significantly, by 2014 the 50 to 64 age group accounted for almost a quarter of all economically active people in the labour market between the ages of 15 and 64. Men accounted for 26 per cent of all economically active males, and women for 23 per cent of all economically active females between the ages of 20 and 64.

While professional type jobs for all the economically active from 15 to 64 increased between 1998 and 2014, these occupations declined as a proportion of all occupations for older workers above 50, providing little indication that workers in higher-level occupations are more likely to remain economically active over the age of 50. Alternatively, the proportion in middle-level jobs increased substantially, while the proportion of service/manual jobs also increased moderately with age, in 2014, providing some support for the suggestion that older workers in lower-level occupations, particularly over the age of 60, are more likely to remain economically active.

The most common form of flexible work is part-time working and the incidence of this increased modestly for the 50 to 64 age category between 1998 and 2014. This increase was mainly associated with a rise in the proportion of men working part time, while the proportion of women remained relatively stable. Even so, part-time working remains overwhelmingly the preserve of females, with older male workers significantly less likely to work part time. This provides substantial support for the proposition that males over 50 are likely to have significantly lower levels of part-time working than women over the age of 50. Given the prevalence of high levels of part-time working among women of all ages, it can hardly be considered an innovative flexible practice to facilitate retaining older women in



the labour market. Flexible work is often low quality, and zero-hour-type contracts are not particularly flexible for the employees involved (Chalmers et al., 2005; Kalleberg, 2009).

Level of education is strongly associated with the likelihood of older workers remaining economically active. Higher levels of education increase the chances of people remaining active, compared to those with lower levels of education – an association that is stronger for women than men. However, the impact of education on the likelihood of remaining active in the labour market declines with age, particularly for the 60 to 64 age group.

From a public policy perspective, the increase in the proportion of older workers participating in the labour market in the 50 to 64 age category, from 52 per cent in 1998 to 66 per cent of the 50 to 64s in 2014, is a positive development. Yet, less than half of the 60 to 64 age group, and a fifth of the 65 to 69 category, remained active in the labour market, based on the QNHS figures from the fourth quarter in 2014. Given that the effective qualifying age for the contributory state pension is now 66, rising to 67 by 2021 (Social Welfare and Pensions Act, 2011), there is a considerable way to go to ensure that people remain in the labour market up to the state retirement age.

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