

**A look into the work of care professionals:  
job quality and relational coordination**

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CONFERENCE ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** The Care Living Labs programme in Flanders (Belgium) supports projects in which innovations in older adult care are tested in real life. Although the primary target group consists of older adults, care professionals are inherently part of care innovations. The study consists of three steps: (1) document analysis of the living lab project plans; (2) survey on job quality and relational coordination among care professionals; (3) interactive workshops. This abstract treats the second step.

The survey is short and serves as a quickscan. The results will be used as a basis for more extensive analysis during the workshops.

**Theory/Methods:**

The study combines two theoretical concepts: job quality and relational coordination. (1) Karasek's Job Demand / Control model predicts that job quality results from the combination of workload (i.e. job demands) and autonomy (i.e. job control). Karasek identifies four job types: low strain jobs (low demands, high control), high strain jobs (high demands, low control), passive jobs (low demands, low control) and active jobs (high demands, high control). Questions on job demands and job control were selected from the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS). (2) Relational coordination refers to shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect between care professionals. A reduced

version of Gittell's questionnaire was used to assess the overall level of relational coordination between care professionals. All care professionals involved were invited to fill in the online survey.

**Results:** The first results indicate strong differences in job quality between different categories of care professionals (e.g. nurses, care assistants, home carers, cleaners). Differences in relational coordination are less pronounced, although indications were found that a higher percentage of high strain jobs seems to relate to a lower level of relational coordination. More detailed results will be presented during the conference.

**Discussions:** Karasek's model predicts that mental strain results from the interaction of high job demand and low job control. Active jobs, which tackle high job demands with high job control, would minimize mental strain risks and increase learning capacity. Given that care job demands are not likely to decrease in the near future, and care innovations require learning capacity, work processes may need to be redesigned to allow increases in job control for a broad range of care professionals. The study shows that certain care professionals are in need of special attention, since they have relatively more high strain jobs. Relational coordination, which is about communicating and relating for the purpose of task integration, can contribute to the level of job control.

**Conclusions / Lessons learned:** Increasing the level of job control is key to improving the job quality of care professionals. Relational coordination could help to improve job control.

**Limitations / Suggestions for future research:** To minimize the burden for the respondents the survey was kept short. In future living lab projects, more extensive surveys could be used. Multiple measurements would allow longitudinal analysis to monitor the effect of innovations on the care professionals involved.

**Key Words** living lab, job quality, relational coordination, older adult care

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