

## **EXPERIENCE IS CAPITAL": THE EQUAL AGORA 2005 ON AGE AND DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT**

More than 40 EQUAL projects, 200 speakers and in all over 570 participants from throughout Europe met in Paris on the 23rd and 24th June 2005 to debate and explore solutions to the problems of low employment participation rates of the over 50s. Policy makers, businesses, social partners and representatives of institutions and territories were able to learn from the wealth of innovative and practical experience from EQUAL and to explore the possibilities for transferring solutions between countries to address common problems.

The Agora was jointly organised by the European Commission and the French Ministry for Employment, Social Cohesion and Housing. Partners from Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Poland, Portugal and Spain gave active support by presenting concrete experiences developed under EQUAL. The Agora was structured around four themes:

- Age management, including older workers,
- Towards the management of all ages,
- Promoting diversity
- Together in Europe.



Each theme was organised in four parallel areas, which allowed for a discussion of views from the individual, entrepreneurial, institutional or territorial perspectives. After a short interactive plenary session, the participants could move on to the specific areas. The participants also had the opportunity to meet representatives of the selected EQUAL projects that they were interested in. Participants could:

- discover by themselves the products or tools developed during EQUAL Round 1 through the material at disposal (books, guide, internet site, etc.),
- attend the small fora facilitated by an animator and two projects,
- set up meetings around tables at specific times with representatives of projects which allowed for in-depth discussion with 3 or 4 persons about methodologies, tools or products developed,
- browse and discover either documentation at the "health at work" area
- catch video clips relating to age management.

To meet the challenges of intense communication the Agora used an impressive variety of means of interaction: from one-to-one discussion, through project presentations, enactments of the issues facing older workers and intimate small seminars, to forum debates.

Key messages emerged in all themes. However, speakers and participants stressed that there were no simple solutions or perfect recipes and that the lessons derived from the EQUAL experience had to be tailored to the particular context and validated.

### **THEME 1: INCLUDING OLDER WORKERS: AVOIDING THE EXCLUSION OF SENIORS FROM THE LABOUR MARKET.**

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The issue: The population of Europe is ageing. Falling birth rates and increases in life expectancy will prolong or intensify this trend. Because of this, promoting active ageing and policies to foster

the employability of over 50-year olds are high priorities. Key messages: Three key messages on how to prevent the exclusion of older workers and to promote active ageing emerged from the debates at the Agora:

- It is necessary to *identify the trends/realities of age and work* in order to discover and to build adapted and tailor-made strategies. EQUAL partners are working successfully with companies in different parts of Europe. This process is crucial to change people's attitude and to move from passive discrimination to active age management policies.
- *Diagnosing the impact of ageing is essential* to guide action. This means appreciating the constraints and possibilities that the environment and the local labour market impose and have to offer and identifying opportunities and mechanisms to promote mobility within companies.
- *Anticipating the evolution* of ageing should be the objective of age management strategies. This involves: setting up measures to address the needs of both employees and employers; promoting better working conditions; and putting in place flexible forms of employment and career management strategies. This requires an anticipatory approach to skills' and responsibilities' management within companies and a focus on the acquisition, development and transmission of competences.

An example: By incorporating tailor-made training activities for senior workers, the EQUAL project Part'@ge has injected a new impulse into the rather traditional and conservative agricultural sector. The impact created by Part'@ge was very positive as activities targeted at senior workers were organised with the specific working context and existing social ties in mind. The approach chosen has fostered the productivity of agricultural companies by helping them face and tackle the problems of modernisation and the need to help adapt their aged workforces to these changes, by making the best use of their own dynamics and resources.

"It is essential to offer to ageing workers the possibility to evolve within the company in order to avoid the loss of valuable skills. It is a matter of adaptability, training and career management." Explained Marie-Antoniette Blondin, who is responsible for vocational training within Candia, one of the companies that benefited from Part'@ge activities.

## THEME 2: TOWARDS MANAGEMENT OF ALL AGES

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The issue: As Europe's workforce ages employers are becoming increasingly concerned about the knowledge and experience they will lose when experienced employees leave the workforce forever. The Agora discussed how projects have successfully promoted the retention and exchange of tacit knowledge between employees.

Key messages include:

- *Recognise and identify the skills and experience* that experienced employees have and organisations need to retain. This is critical to ensure the ongoing economic success of the organisation, ensuring that the wealth of knowledge and experience that experienced employees possess is transferred to future generations of employees.
- *Explore and pilot methods to transfer this knowledge and experience.* This is necessary to ensure that the knowledge and skills are transferred in the most efficient and beneficial way. This means involving all members of the organisation who will be affected by the process – managers, experienced employees and new recruits, to make certain that they are satisfied with the process and feel that they are gaining as much from it as possible.

An example: Through using a 'Tandem Partnership' Soziale Innovation GmbH, in Germany have successfully developed a method of transferring knowledge between experienced employees and new recruits. The experienced employees receive training and gather experience on how to teach others. Then they teach and pass on their skills to newly recruited employees. The term 'Tandem' is used to represent a learning partnership between the two people. In total the process lasts for approximately 1 -2 months with workstations being transferred from one employee to another during this time.

"Before I became involved in this work, I was bored and I felt that no employer wanted my skills. Now this project has helped me get back into the business world and to feel that people are benefiting from my experience", said an employee at formatrice, one of the organisations to have benefited from the EQUAL project Vectorat, which has promoted the transfer of knowledge and skills of experienced employees within organisations.

### THEME 3: PROMOTING DIVERSITY

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The issues: "The media reflects societal attitudes which value youth, power and beauty - attributes that older workers are perceived not to possess" explained Tiina Merikanto, a producer from TV2/YLE, Finland. Older workers are rarely portrayed in the media in a positive light. Often the media does not use them in programmes, preferring to opt for younger participants, as older workers are not always worthy of "front page news". This helps sustain the confusion within society between age and inability.



Key messages include:

- The media can help to influence and even change attitudes within society. Through, for example, representing older people for the skills and values that they have and through using positive examples of the older workforce. Promoting diversity within organisations and society more generally relies on positive messages being relayed by the media and senior managers.
- Diversity in the workplace is needed more than ever before. Employers should recognise the values that

each employee can offer the organisation. In order to incorporate the individuality of each employee, organisations need to consider new ways of thinking and training.

An example: Through training employers to manage diversity Universal Learning Systems, in Ireland working in conjunction with the EQUAL project TRED have enabled a number of organisations to attract a wider diversity of ages and people with different cultural backgrounds. Executives within the targeted organisations now recognise that some employees are at risk of redundancy due to outsourcing and have developed further training for them to make them more attractive to prospective employers. Through the development of the accredited Foundation Diploma in Equality and Diversity, EQUAL has been able to support the implementation of inclusive work practices and diversity management. The approach has been successful and is now used by Police forces in Ireland.

### THEME 4: TOGETHER IN EUROPE.

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The issue: There are many commonalities in the problems addressed in Member States. However the transfer of experience has to take into account the particular context. The Agora showcased the transnational experience of EQUAL and brought together partners from different Member States who have cooperated at the transnational level to further share their experiences and to transfer good and innovative practices. The outputs of transnational cooperation partnerships include common products such as websites, vocational support, pedagogical tools and visibility conferences.

Transnational partnerships show that exchange and common action is productive between partners, even where administrative and institutional differences exist. The exchange gives an

impulse to local partners by showing possibilities from beyond national boundaries. It also allows the discovery of a community for support with problem-solving and the set up of innovative paths for further action.

Transnational cooperation operates in a twofold way, by transferring a practice that already exists into another context or by elaborating new common solutions through a consultation between partners.

EQUAL acts as a "*melting pot*" for good practices, from which projects can take and adapt approaches to apply in their own contexts.

An example: the Transnational partnership *WISER* includes: *AGES et TRAVAIL*, a French EQUAL Development Partnership (DP) aimed at strengthening the skills and abilities of older workers in the French building sector; *Building London Creating Futures*, an English DP working on employment creation; and, *FAIR*, a German DP promoting the adaptability of individuals and companies. The three partners came together because they were all facing a common challenge: How to improve the adaptability of disadvantaged groups, such as older and low-qualified workers, in the labour market? All three DPs were also developing approaches to retain employees, and to increase their skills.

Through transnational cooperation, *AGES et TRAVAIL* opted to test the concept of the "Work Place Coordinator" developed by Building London Creating Futures, an "on-the-work-floor" human resource function. The method was adapted to the French Midi Pyrenean regional context following a study visit to London by several regional companies. By applying the "Work Place Coordinator" concept *AGES et TRAVAIL* hopes to improve the recruitment and training of people in the building sector and to retain them within the sector.

From the German partner *FAIR*, *AGES et TRAVAIL* adopted a workshop methodology for on-the-job training in SMEs. *FAIR* helped experienced workers and new staff to jointly identify skills that are important for certain jobs and the best ways for passing these skills on from present to new employees. The workshop approach helped the transfer of team skills and proved to be very effective when tested by *AGES et TRAVAIL*.

During a very fruitful exchange between specialists in various disciplines at the "café philosophique" experience was qualified as the essence of human existence. It is when the individual takes risks and makes mistakes that experience is created. And it is through becoming conscient of this experience at the individual level, communicating, sharing and mobilising it in the economic and social spheres that human experience is transformed into a valuable capital which can bring change, hope and new openings for the future.

Another specific session was dedicated to a well-known French Human Resources' association, "Club RH Essec". A debate took place around corporate social responsibility including Age Management led by Club RH.

This event also welcomed the participation of journalists from across Europe and time was dedicated to a "media platform" where journalists shared national views on Age Management.

The Agora was an important opportunity for the development of Age Management in Europe. It was also the biggest event on the results of EQUAL round one.