

CROSSING INSTITUTIONAL BORDERS TO PROMOTE AGE MANAGEMENT

In September 2005, the National Thematic Network (NTN) on Age Management was launched. A shared concern about the low participation of older workers in the Flemish labour market brought the 13 members of this network together. Their concern is illustrated in the employment rate of older workers in Belgium – being amongst the lowest in the European Union (EU), and a far cry from the 50% target by 2010 that the EU has set itself in the Lisbon agenda!

More than a year on, an enthusiastic and productive network is now in existence, discussing and sharing information on a range of tools and best practices for age management, promoting age-positive practices in companies, and ultimately working to influence policy makers to improve the position of Flanders - and Belgium more broadly - vis-à-vis the Lisbon targets.

But is there really a need for age management? Most definitely yes, if you look at the demographic trends. While lower birth rates and longer periods of education have led to a decreasing inflow of new and/or young employees, the stark rise in life expectancy has meant that those aged 50 and over represent one in five of the workforce, soon to be one in four (Eurofound 2006:1). Age management constitutes a necessary response to these trends.

Within the scope of these trends and the challenge of meeting the Lisbon targets, the Belgian government has developed its policy on age management along four main lines:

- the registration of the newly unemployed as job seekers;
- the adaptation of working conditions;
- financial incentives for employers and workers to promoting the return or continuation of older workers on the labour market;
- changing attitudes by raising awareness among actors (employment committee of experienced workers created on federal level).

However, there are limited government funds to support the implementation of this policy. In addition, there is a key obstacle, explained as follows: *'A perceived need among companies and organisations to change their attitude towards age management and to be made aware of and have access to related instruments and good practices'* (Stefaan Ryckewaert, Flanders European Social Fund (ESF) Agency).

The NTN on Age Management has stepped in to address this gap. Continuing the work of Round 1 of EQUAL, it has played a key role in raising awareness among employers about the importance of actively 'managing' the competences and employment paths of their employees, and nurturing *all* the skills present in the company. Moreover, this role has been strengthened by the way in which the network has been set up, namely by:

- combining the insights and inputs of different practitioners, not just those from EQUAL; and
- creating a real and dynamic community for exchange, debate and learning.

This network arrangement has undoubtedly provided a 'springboard' for EQUAL projects and provided a real positive impact for their work. Put in the words of one network member: *'It is a key that opens many doors. Your organisation and the work you engage in are no longer unknown.'* (Lucas Piette, Vso Werkholding/t-groep)

The idea that lay at the inception of the Age Management NTN was a network that centres on a key priority issue of the Flemish labour market, and that gathers a critical mass of individuals and organisations who are working on this issue and can see the added value of doing this together. In total, 11 organisations responded to an open call by the ESF Agency in Flanders to set up the network: one EQUAL project from Round 1 (Idea Consult), four from Round 2 (Unizo, Vso Werkholding/t-groep, Syntra West and Katholieke Hogeschool Sint-Lieven), and six ESF Objective 3 projects (Creyf's, VOKA West-Vlaanderen, Universiteit Hasselt, Deceuninck NV, HIVA en Indie Group). The Department for Work and Social Economy also joined the network.

A key ingredient in the success of the NTN has been the mixture of organisations and projects gathered around the table. As seen above, EQUAL projects have joined forces with ESF projects within the same network, thereby shedding the straitjackets that the structure or funding of programmes might otherwise have imposed. As one network member explains:

'At the end of the day, we are all working towards the same goal, which is to boost the participation of older workers in the Flemish and Belgian labour market.' Considering the long road that lay ahead of them, she adds *'all potential resources had to be identified and mobilised to further age management in the region.'* (Vera Audoor, Creyf's)

The EQUAL projects have also added a valuable transnational element to the network, positioning its work and its members in a broader, European context. For example, at their last network meeting, the EQUAL projects offered to report back to the network on the debates and activities that they were involved in through their EQUAL transnational partnerships.

In general, as projects are located in diverse segments of the labour market (e.g. academia, companies, organisations whose clients are companies), they bring different perspectives on, and interests in, the problem of retaining older workers within the labour market. The ensuing dialogue ensures the relevance, applicability and user-friendliness of the tools and practices developed to increase the employment rate of older workers in Flanders.

But the network is not just confined to the EQUAL or ESF projects! On the contrary, the network has also established direct contacts with representatives of the federal and Flemish administration, which has been of vital importance to the network members. Through such links, the members have been able to plug into policy developments and be informed of government measures and funding opportunities to support companies in their age management (e.g. Generation Pact and Ervaringsfonds[1]). In some cases, they have even helped by providing and reinforcing messages for the projects' own clients (employers, companies) – in other words, confronting them with the issue of an ageing and shrinking workforce, an issue that is here to stay and demands employers' attention sooner rather than later.

The benefits of this wide and diverse networking can be seen in the session organised to discuss the Generation Pact (adopted by the federal government in October 2005)[2]. Since the session, the speakers and network members have remained in close contact, providing members with direct in-roads into the federal and Flemish administrations in relation to their age management work. The members have also gained a valuable partner in the form of an Ervaringsfonds representative, who now sits on the Steering Group of an EQUAL project and frequently draws upon the network to disseminate its activities and findings. What a fine example of how a thematic network can capitalise on its shared resources and expand its zone of influence!

A VIBRANT COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

In more detailed and practical terms, what the network wants to achieve is:

- ensuring that information on existing tools and practices is shared;
- that their effectiveness is assessed and documented;
- that they are updated to incorporate latest developments and changes; and most critically,
- that they are eventually embedded in mainstream practice and policy.

These points are encapsulated in the words of one network member: *'You lose a lot of time and energy if you have to come up with advice, strategies and tools for your client. Being in the thematic network, you often know that partner x or y is working on a particular tool or instrument and you contact them to discuss using it with your client. It is a win-win-situation as the client is satisfied, the expertise of your own project has been augmented as you have learned how to use*

the tool and translate it to a particular context and your partner has been given an opportunity to test or implement the tools or best practices it has developed and to profile itself as an expert in the area.' (Vera Audoor, Creyf's)

Therefore, the network members have a supportive space to address the problems they face in their daily work, draw on advice from their peers, and devise joint solutions. For example, those project partners working directly with companies often give feedback to those active at the theoretic level to ensure that what they develop responds to what is needed on the ground and can be put into practice.

Another, more direct example can be seen in the lively discussion generated at the last NTN meeting. One of the network members pointed out that convincing employers to engage in an age management project can be a tricky task. This remark triggered a debate and exploration of the sweeping arguments that members could present to convince the employers that they work with. What benefits would the companies get through participation? Could employers be convinced to present their journey regarding age management and sell it as a way of increasing their visibility?

As part of this debate, others were of the opinion that the information-giving phase to employers was reaching an end, and that a different phase was dawning. An ESF project partner (Christophe Viaene, VOKA West-Vlaanderen) poignantly remarked: *'Five years ago when VOKA West-Vlaanderen launched 'Kennispool 50+' we struggled to convince employers to join the project. We ended up working with 4/5 large companies. Now, when we started 'Vuurtoeren 45+' a year ago, we received a positive response of more than 40 companies.'*

This new phase was seen as being all about showing employers how to make the first step towards *actual* age management - in other words, translating their newly acquired principles into practice. Several members of the network reported that an increasing number of employers request information about tools and practices and ask to be brought in contact with employers who are already reaping the fruits of their investments.

Looking at these and other examples, it is evident that the network has become a dynamic community of practice, generating crucial insights and bringing diverse knowledge to the table.

FUTURE: DISSEMINATION AND MAINSTREAMING

In addition to dissemination and mainstreaming of the network's findings and activities, the agenda for future meetings is to focus on influencing policy-makers. Fortunately, the network members have already noticed changes in the attitudes and approaches adopted by policy-makers in relation to age management. The Belgian government's reaction to the recent announcement of a collective dismissal at the Volkswagen factory in Vorst was presented as an example of this. Here the government has pushed for setting up 'employment cells' for all the over 50s, whether they be unemployed or have applied for early retirement.

A promising future for the network was sketched by the partners: *'We creatively and dynamically engage with the expertise available in Flanders to work towards our common goal and to produce better products. The positive experiences of members of the network are of that kind that the network will not stop at the end of ESF or EQUAL funding. The value of this success and continuity cannot be overestimated.'* (Lucas Piette, Vso Werkholding/t-groep)

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[1] Het Ervaringsfonds is a federal funding instrument to support companies with projects focusing on older workers. The Generation pact was adopted by the federal government in October 2005.

For further information, see <http://www.premier.be/nl/politics/generationpact.html>

[2] <http://www.premier.be/nl/politics/generationpact.html>