

MAKING ACTIVE AGEING A REALITY IN GREECE

The problem of early retirement is high on the political agenda in Greece - only 40% of those aged 55 to 64 are employed, and by 2010 the size of the 20-24 age group will be smaller than the 60-64 age group. Even though some companies - especially the larger ones - have started implementing measures to tackle early retirement, there is a perceived lack of measures at a broader, institutional level which could also benefit smaller firms. Moreover, Greece, as many other European countries, faces restructuring in specific sectors which again, hits particularly older workers and creates a need for continuous training and adaptation to technological changes. The challenge facing Greece is to design a concrete and clear approach for future action - an 'active ageing vision' - which all actors, and especially the social partners, can sign up to.

The European Union urges Member States, amongst other actions, to promote active ageing and to increase the participation of older workers in the labour market. Moreover, they were asked to establish a holistic and strategic approach. Now seven years into the Lisbon strategy, it is becoming clear that a number of Member States – including Greece – are encountering the challenge of bringing the issue of active ageing to the forefront of national policy. This is exactly the challenge that the *Empiria*^{EU} project – led by the Economic and Social Council of Greece - has been designed to address; by tackling the problem from its very roots, making sure the vital partners are included to change policy and practice at the highest levels.

The launch of the *Empiria* project represents the first time in Greece that an integrated approach has been developed towards the issue of active ageing for all sectors of the economy. Having the main social partners on board - such as the INE-GSEE Trade Union's Confederation (INE/GSEE) and the general confederation of Small-and-Medium Sized Businesses, Craftsmen-Traders of Greece (GSEVEE) - is a prerequisite for achieving success. Apostolos Xyraphis, coordinator of the project explains: *"We saw it as our duty to do something about the large group of older workers leaving the labour market way too early each year for different reasons. It was our main priority to get the social partners on board to achieve a real change in mentality and to create the best circumstances possible for older workers to be motivated to stay longer in their job. It has not been an easy process since we have to really mediate between quite opposing views...but one result has already been achieved: we got them talking and prepared to do something about this issue!"*

Now that these partners have engaged in an open social dialogue, the way is paved to focus on a progressive exploration of good practice, and an effective and wide-spread use of the project's results.

FROM GOOD INTENTIONS TO GOOD PRACTICE

Changing the traditional practice of early retirement and promoting good practice for active ageing in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors sounds very challenging... how is *Empiria* going to achieve this exactly?

Not reinventing the wheel for starters! The starting point is to collect examples of good practice from other Member States and to adapt them to the specific Greek context. Tailor-made toolkits to bring active ageing into practice in the workplace will be developed to cover topics such as: individualised consulting and career consulting; application of flexible forms of work organization; improvement of health and safety conditions at work; and, the standardisation of procedures in personnel management regarding ageing. These toolkits will be spread amongst the different users in this project, employers, human resource managers, mentors working in and representing various sizes of companies and economic sectors, which will function as multipliers and thus reach an even larger group of users. Moreover, social partners' representatives are included in the group of users so they can evaluate the practical measures towards active ageing themselves.

The toolkits will also leave room for adaptation to the technological changes in the economy and the need for constant learning and up-skilling. Additionally, the users of the toolkit will be supported by experts. The experts have been specifically trained to support and guide the toolkit users in the implementation of the practices towards active ageing.

Besides the toolkits containing good practices to be tested and adapted to the Greek context, the project also focuses on identifying and developing institutional measures with the view to creating successful active ageing policies. This goes hand-in-hand with the development of the most appropriate social dialogue procedures: involving the social partners in such a way that active ageing policies within firms can become a reality.

The toolkits are built upon existing good practice, however the real innovation within *Empiria* is the creation of a central 'observatory' for active ageing issues in Athens, accompanied by a network of 'antennas' which cover the whole of Greece and therefore ensure that all regions are covered. The great advantage of both the observatory and its antennas is that all information and products developed can then be easily accessed by, and disseminated to, all cities in Greece.

OBSERVING, LEARNING AND CHANGING

Besides functioning as the perfect basis for promoting good practice all over Greece in the area of active ageing, the observatory and its network of antennas also have an important mainstreaming potential. Who better than the users - the practitioners on the ground - to come and give their feedback, or to point out what the challenges are and what has to be changed at the institutional level? Their experiences are critical, and for this reason the observatory and the different antennas are focused on collecting their opinion and making sure this is communicated to the relevant institutions. The observatory in Athens will ensure that the relevant information is compiled from all the antennas and relayed to higher political levels. An example of this could be to put the institutional arrangements in place which make it possible that older employees as well as self-employed older people can alter their usual tasks with time put into intergenerational learning. This would benefit both the younger generation as well as the older employees. The aim is to highlight bottlenecks in, for example, legislation, and to take the appropriate steps to abolish these, as well as adapt legislation to current needs.

The *Empiria* project targets a range of bottlenecks so that not only legislation changes as necessary, but that the most effective procedures in the field of age management are institutionalised through the involvement of the social partners and other necessary stakeholders. This method ensures that good practice that has been tested become common practice all over Greece. Since users are involved from all sectors, the practice developed as well as the proposals for mainstreaming can benefit a similarly broad range of older workers.

USING PARTNERSHIPS TO CHANGE PRACTICE

A further innovative element of *Empiria* is the ground-breaking partnership formed to deliver it; in fact the *Empiria* project is *the* key to laying proper foundations for an active ageing policy for the whole of Greece. For the first time in Greece, employer organisations and trade unions are sitting at a table together and engaging in an open social dialogue about this important issue. As a representative of the INE-GSEE explains: *"For once we are not caught up in endless debates about how to reform the pension system, but we discuss, analyse and study how concrete practices in active ageing can make a difference. It's time to propose proper solutions which work. We are at an important point of transition as a consequence of advanced technology and globalisation, and we want the older part of the population included in this process, not excluded"*.

"And..." adds Nicholas Analytis - president of the Economic and Social Council of Greece - *"...let's not forget, it is not only about increasing the official retirement age. We have to create the right environment for older workers to want to stay longer in employment. We have to create less heavy working conditions for those workers having worked under difficult circumstances all of*

their life. We have to take account of the different characteristics within the group of older workers. Also, we have to make clear to them that their experience is of great value".

The *Empiria* partnership includes 14 different partners. This high number of partners is necessary to attain the integrated approach needed to bring about the ambitious changes. Besides the social partners, several training centres, the University of Athens and other research institutes have all joined to make sure the future approach towards older workers is looked at from a wide range of angles.

The research institutes have the specific task of making sure the early retirement problem is sufficiently investigated and they provide the evidence - information and data for different companies, groups of older workers and all sectors. The training centres have the important role of making sure that, in addition to the information provided by the research partners, the collected examples of good practice from abroad are well adapted to the specifics of the Greek economy and company cultures.

All these partners together are able to convince the social partners to participate and to make the potential benefits clear. For example, considering the high youth unemployment in Greece, practices in the area of intergenerational learning appeals very highly to the social partners. As Apostolos Xyraphis from the D.P. Empiria states as an example: *"Young people nowadays do not want to become farmers anymore. The only way to avoid them going to the cities for other jobs is to have their fathers and grandfathers transferring valuable knowledge, as well as showing them the value of it".*

The project, with its products and unique partnership, contributes to the debate on the reform of social security by offering concrete and 'road-tested' solutions that work on the ground. It thus incites important stakeholders to look beyond simply changes to the pension system in order to make active ageing a reality in Greece.

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