

REACHING EU TARGETS FOR THE OVER 50s

In 2001, the European Union (EU) Member States adopted targets to increase the share of older workers in employment from an EU average of 40% to 50% by 2010. Since that time, Member States have been busily working to develop policies and launch initiatives to reach these targets, changing the way older workers are perceived in our culture and society, and maximising the role that experienced workers in the over the age of 50 can play in the labour market. So what progress has been made against these targets, and what relevant lessons and examples can be drawn from EQUAL? Read on to find out...

THE CONTEXT AND PROGRESS SO FAR

Successful reforms have been set up successfully in sixteen Member States, which have led to increases of 5% or more, with especially strong rises (over 10%) in Finland, Hungary and Latvia. These positive results have been particularly down to active ageing policies and reforms in the area of pensions systems [1]. However, despite these reforms, there is still work to be done. As Vladimír Špidla, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, put it: *"Despite the rise in the employment rates of women and older workers, progress towards the overall employment rate target of 70% is simply not fast enough. It is clear that reaching this requires more effort in most Member States. Rigorous implementation of reforms in line with the European Employment Guidelines must be the order of the day"* [2].

In the 2006 Spring European Council, the Heads of State and Government reiterated the need for the more effective and comprehensive implementation of the European Employment Strategy, particularly by emphasising a number of aspects, such as an adequate balance between security and flexibility in the labour market (i.e. "flexicurity"), mobility, education and skills, and a life-cycle approach to labour force. Clearly, many of these aspects embraced the issue of active aging, an issue that was already emphasised in the 2004 European Spring Council during which the European Commission identified active ageing as one of the three core priority areas for which actions were rapidly needed to realise the goals of the Lisbon Strategy. At this same time, the social partners were called upon to design and implement comprehensive active ageing practices in workplaces and across labour markets. The conclusions of the 2005 Spring Council again underlined the importance of extending working life and of initiating active ageing strategies.

But against this background of policy priorities and messages, what's the situation now? Well recently, the European Commission issued a Green Paper "[Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations](#)", which restates the significance of the challenge for Europe of its ageing population. The Commission wants both companies and workers, as well as other concerned parties to participate in the forthcoming debate on the Green Paper and to put forward their views to inform on the next steps. This consultation process (open until the 31 March 2007) will help to identify and gather the main policy issues and options across the EU, and most critically, will form the basis of a follow-up Commission Communication later in 2007.

Another key development is the recently published Commission Communication on "[The demographic future of Europe – from challenge to opportunity](#)" [3] which also stresses that active ageing should take account of the opportunities offered by trends of increased life expectancy and better health at an advanced age. To launch this Communication, a [Forum](#) event was held in Brussels on 30 and 31 October 2006, and included some interesting sessions covering the different themes of the Communication, namely:

- Gender equality at home as a precondition for work-life balance
- Active ageing in a life course perspective
- Successful migration and integration
- Family policies: a way for society to invest in children
- Preventive health measures assisted living and long term care
- Regional opportunities for managing demographic change
- Presentation of the results of the pilot action on demographic change

And a policy makers' round table: "Reform preparing for ageing: implementation problems and opportunities"

Some of the key messages from the Forum included the need to support active ageing alongside and as an integral part of lifelong learning, healthy working conditions; the adaptation of work places and work organisation to the needs of older workers; as well as the importance of the right incentives to encourage older workers to remain on the labour market.

EQUAL AND ACTIVE AGEING: STILL A MAJOR THEME!

So where is EQUAL currently situated in terms of addressing the issues of active ageing and age management? And what insights does it offer for current debates around the Commission Green Paper and Communication? In answer to these questions, here is a quick summary of related work in EQUAL, followed by a number of useful examples.

The theme of older workers and age management was particularly strong in the first round of EQUAL between 2001 and 2004. The 117 Development Partnerships (DP) set up during this timeframe were very innovative, developing new types of work organisation within companies, and new cultures and perceptions vis-à-vis older workers within the labour market. These successful practices are now published (see [here](#)). Most of these activities were also supported by very active national thematic networks focusing on age management; some [success stories of these networks](#), notably those in France, Germany and Ireland, have also been published. Since the launch of the second round of EQUAL (in 2005), there is [evidence](#) that age management is still a prominent theme.

Some promising DPs can already be highlighted here, like the Polish DP [Alliance for Work](#). This partnership works to increase labour market participation by using the potential of the over 45s in a 'jobcoaching' capacity, as well as by improving the employment potential of older workers through up-skilling and training. Most of all, it aims to change the psychological and cultural attitudes, both those of older workers vis-à-vis their own professional worth, as well as those of employers and trade unions in relation to employing and managing a more mature workforce.

Similar objectives are pursued by the British DP, [Skill Analysis](#), which, on the one hand, influences SME employment policy in the recruitment and retention of older workers by identifying undiscovered competences, and on the other, enables older workers to influence potential employers by providing evidence of their individual competencies.

Another good example is the Swedish project [Life competence - a plus for 50+](#) that has created a comprehensive approach for those over 50, which includes an audit of existing material concerning the target group, the development of a 'competence analysis', the establishment of a network of agencies, and working with employers to increase awareness of the competences of those over 50 and ultimately prevent discrimination. The project's overall goal is that older people will be able to provide tailor-made services (e.g. mentoring) and administrative support to companies on the basis of their revealed competences.

In Finland, the [Making a change a chance](#) DP focuses on the ageing employees of SME retailers, wholesalers and service producers, developing the willingness and flexibility of SMEs to respond to changes in the Finnish economy through innovative and comprehensive approaches improving the adaptability of firms by raising the skills and "readiness for change" of their most vulnerable workers. The project aims at fostering the synergies between quality at work, productivity and employment, developing active and preventive labour market measures including the early identification of needs, guidance and training as part of personalised action plans, as well as providing services to support the inclusion and adaptability of enterprises and their workforce.

Aside from the DP activities themselves, there have been a number of interesting age management networks and events within EQUAL. For example, the [Polish Network](#) has not only provided an open place for discussion, sharing good practice and innovative ideas, but also by a spring board for the results of the EQUAL projects to reach key actors, at all levels. Aside from the projects represented on this network, there have been policy makers, social partners and thematic experts, all of whom have been able to provide support inside, as well as ensure the impact outside of the network.

Other networks have been set up, in Belgium, Germany, Greece, Portugal and Spain. Great things are expected from these networks as they include significant policy makers and actors, and draw directly on the lessons and firm foundation from the Round 1. Germany, for instance, has expanded the network set up in 2001, with the official participation of INQA, the "New Quality

of Work Initiative" which is a joint project of the Federal Government, the Länder, social insurance institutions and the social partners. The German network is also further developing an 'Age Management Tool Box', based on the original model that was launched under the first round.

TRANSNATIONALITY WORKS - BUILDING STRENGTH AMONG EQUALS

Collecting good practice that can be transferred or adapted at the European level is – and continues to be - a major achievement of EQUAL. The conference organised in [Warsaw](#) in 2004 or the [Agora](#) in Paris in 2005 showed that national representatives at local, regional or national level are very interested in hearing and exchanging experiences with and from other countries. This transnational exchange between countries is important part of EQUAL.

A recent good example of a transnational meeting is the one organised by the [Alliages - Alliance pour la valorisation de la diversité à tous les âges](#) (for the Diversity of All Ages) DP. This project, together with their Italian partner *Start Again After 45!*, met on 1 December 2006. Through the meeting and associated activities, the two partners have been able to exchange the experiences in terms of maintaining 45+ workers in the labour market who are at risk of exclusion because of low levels of qualification, a lack of career development, etc. They have also been able to discuss possible methodologies to implement in companies to promote an age-embracing equal opportunity policy. The planned end product of this work will be the publication of a guide for distribution to SME managers and employees.

The benefit of transnationality has also been seen recently in Poland. The Polish EQUAL Managing Authority organised the [Adaptability Peer Review](#) on 3 and 4 October 2006, bringing together DP representatives from seven countries, namely Belgium, Ireland, Great Britain, Spain, Portugal, Greece and Poland. The event was structured around four main themes, each of them constituting a strand of the Adaptability pillar. Of particular relevance, the session on the age management concluded that there is still progress to make in raising the companies' awareness towards the employment of older workers. Workers themselves also need to be convinced that lifelong learning is a necessity to adapt to the changing world.

WHAT NEXT?

There is still plenty going on in EQUAL relating to age management. Apart from the ongoing DP activities themselves, there are a number of conferences and workshops planned. In particular, it's worth mentioning that the Life Competence – a plus for 50+ project will be organising a large-scale European conference [Competence 50+](#) on 18 to 20 June 2007, involving up to 500 EQUAL DP representatives, decision-makers and researchers. The conference will involve plenary sessions, seminars, interactive workshops, exhibition space and - on the last day - a session specifically devoted to mingling and establishing contacts in a structured form with the view to creating new transnational partnerships. In the words of Anders Østebo, coordinator at the National Institute for Working Life - one of the Partner organisations in Life Competence – a plus for 50+, this event will *"provide an excellent opportunity for EQUAL projects to find others who have worked with similar approaches to meet and discuss possibilities to work together in the future, learn from each other and come up with new ideas. It is also very important for us to involve researchers, as the link between practitioners and the research community has been less than evident - we think that these two groups have much to learn from each other! It definitely lies in the interests of politicians across Europe to find out about successful innovative approaches to age management. We will provide the forum where they can do this."*

SOURCE OF INFORMATION

In support of this article, here are some useful sources of information to look through.

European Commission

- [2007-2013: Preparing the new generation of Structural Funds programmes](#) (homepage)
- [Community Strategic Guidelines for Cohesion policy](#)
- [Fact sheet on the new structural funds regulations 2007-2013](#)
- [Growth and Jobs agenda - working together for Europe's future](#) (homepage)
- [Ageing and Employment: identification of good practices to increase job opportunities and maintain older workers in Employment](#) (final report, March 2006)

OECD

- [Executive summary of the report Ageing and Employment Policies - "Live Longer, Work Longer"](#), (21 countries)
- [High-level forum on Ageing and Employment Policies](#), Brussels, 17-18 October 2006
- [Newsletter: Older workers - Living longer, working longer](#) - DELSA Newsletter Issue 2

European Foundation for the improvement of Living and Working Conditions

- ["A Guide to Good Practice in Age Management"](#), 2006
- [Employment initiatives for an ageing workforce in the EU15](#), September 2006
- [Age and employment in the new Member States](#), September 2006
- [Age management in companies in Europe](#), August 2006

Other information sources:

- [Age Concern report Regions for all ages: the implications of demographic ageing for regional policy](#), Final Report, January 2006
- [Cedefop: publication "Promoting Lifelong Learning for older workers, an international overview"](#), 2006, 270 pp, extract
- [Cedefop, Agora: Promoting Lifelong Learning for Older Workers](#), 12-13 October 2006

[1] ['Employment in Europe 2006'](#) report, published by the European Commission in November 2006 - eighteenth edition based on the data available as of July 2006 providing a detailed picture of the employment structure in Europe. It gives indications on the gender, type of work, ageing structure, mobility, etc.

[2] Press Release ["EU job situation improves, but new reform push needed to hit 2010 target"](#), 6/11/2006

[3] Brussels, 12.10.2006, COM(2006) 571 final