

## FINDING WHAT YOU NEVER LOST: COMPETENCE 50+

Work until 65, then retire to do all those things that you never had the time to do while you were working: going on holiday; spending time with your family; enjoying hobbies and pursuing other interests. Does this plan sound familiar?



In Sweden, turning 65 has traditionally been a trigger to start a new phase in life – retirement - and becoming a pensioner at 65 is deeply rooted in the mind-set of all age groups. However, in common with other Member States in the European Union (EU), the population in Sweden is aging, and both the median age and the proportion of older people in the population are increasing. Since 1975, the average life expectancy has increased from 78 to 82 for women, and from 72 to 77 for men<sup>[1]</sup>, and currently women who have reached the age of 65 are expected to live until 85, whereas men are expected to live for 16 more years, until they are 81. The proportion of older people (aged 65 and over) in Swedish society has increased to 17.2% of the total population, which is the fourth highest figure in Europe, after Greece, Germany and Italy. Overall in the EU, after increasing by eight years since 1960, assessments indicate that life expectancy at birth could continue to rise by at least a further five years by 2050. <sup>[2]</sup>



Presentation of the project at the Employment week

On the face of it, this might sound appealing: living longer post-retirement means more time for holidays and other recreational activities! But there are a range of wider effects that are not so attractive - not least the strains placed on the social security system and the problems of financing the public services required by an aging population. Recent projections indicate that, even though the objective of 70% in the overall rate of employment as set out in the Lisbon Strategy will be

reached by 2010, the total number of people in work is estimated to decrease by 30 million between the end of this decade and 2050. Demographic ageing therefore calls for an increasing rate of participation of men and women aged over 55. This will require far-reaching reforms to remove incentives for an early exit from the labour market and to encourage the employment of senior citizens. <sup>[3]</sup> This prospect provided the impetus for the EU Member States to adopt targets to increase the share of older workers in employment from around an average of 40% in the EU in 2001 to 50% in 2010.

In order to meet these challenging targets, there are a range of barriers that must be overcome, and there is widespread recognition that simply increasing the retirement age will not solve the problem. For instance, there are legislative barriers which mean that currently in Sweden there is still no right for workers to stay in employment after they turn 67<sup>[4]</sup>; also, the over 50s are not allowed to access study loans. There are also more invisible barriers, such as older workers being out of practice when it comes to 'selling themselves' in the labour market – not knowing what their competencies are and how they respond to the needs of employers; or not having an active network of contacts which they can draw on. It is this type of barrier that the EQUAL project, *Life Competence 50+*, managed by Tjörns Kommun, has been set up to address. The project started in May 2005 and is scheduled to run until December 2007.

Folke Brolin, the Project Coordinator, summarises the rationale of the project as follows: *"Our project has not only developed an innovative approach to explore the competences of older people, which will enable them to either find suitable training to help them stay in their current employment longer or change direction of their work. We have also realised that one major factor that impacts on the possibilities for those over 50 to find new work is that they lack a network of contacts. Therefore, as part of our activities we will also create a network for and by 50+ unemployed who will have as their task to establish and maintain the competences of the participants in the network, and help them to stay in the labour market for longer".*

## A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO DISCOVERY

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Several well-established private and public organisations cooperate in *Life Competence 50+*, which creates excellent opportunities to take advantage of experiences and views from a range of sectors and backgrounds. The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise provides the employer perspective[5], the National Institute for Working Life provides important inputs from the research community, three municipalities give the view of public authorities, whilst the Public Employment Service – which has experience of matching unemployed people with work opportunities - and the Swedish Trade Union Confederation LO[6] represent the view of workers within both the private and the public sectors.



Information meeting at the Public employment service

Together these partners have created a comprehensive approach, which includes:

- An audit of existing material concerning the target group (those over 50);
- A method – the 'competence analysis' – for uncovering an older person's competences in order to increase their awareness of their relevant skills, abilities and desires, and match these assets with the needs of the labour market (this method is outlined below);
- A network of agencies working on these issues, as experience shows that many in the 50+ age group lack contacts to find new work; and
- Work with employers to increase awareness of the competences of those over 50 and prevent discrimination.

The project's 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. This may include being hired for a short time by an organisation which could lead to long-term or permanent contracts.

This goal is described by Folke Brolin: *"We are aware that many newly started businesses often have a critical period after one year and that many end up closing their company shortly after this time. Therefore, we have the idea that older people can act as a support at this time, on the basis of their previous work and experiences – be it as a mentor or providing administrative or technical support. We are very enthusiastic about this approach, and both the public and private sectors have already shown interest in what we are doing - effective age management is clearly something that is important across businesses and industry"*.

## WHERE TO START LOOKING?

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Everyone has had the experience of looking for something in a bag and 'finding' things they didn't even know they had lost. And so it is with the skills and abilities gained over a lifetime – very few of us could accurately describe the things we are good at, transferring experiences gained in one area of life to another. Yet *Life Competence 50+* has developed an innovative method, the 'competence analysis', to assist those over 50 to do exactly that.

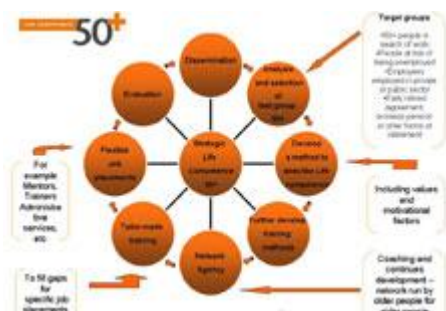
The method has been created both for those who are still in employment - but risk unemployment, wish to change to a new job within their current company or move to a new one – or who are unemployed and have difficulties re-entering the labour market. Through individual and group sessions with a specially trained coach, the participants are assisted in discovering what their skills and competences are and developing an action plan in line with their interests, skills, values and wishes for the future.

*"I wish something similar would have existed when I wanted to change profession a few years ago,"* says Danuta Ciasnocha, project manager for the development of the method.

*"I had worked as a teacher my entire professional life, but was tired of teaching and wanted to try something new...but what could I do? I asked myself. 'Teaching' was the plain and simple*

answer. But I did not want to teach anymore! Then I started thinking 'what are the actual skills that I used in my profession'? I realised that not only can I teach, but have good organisational skills, good writing skills and information provision skills. Today I am not only hired by the municipality of Mölndal – and through this employment, project manager in this EQUAL project – but am also responsible for information provision in another EU project and do some work as a freelance journalist."

The competence analysis model is still being refined, but has been tested on pilot groups and is working well so far. In order to not 'reinvent the wheel', the starting point was to research the market for similar approaches, developed both by private and public actors. An invitation to participate in a one-day discussion on the concept 'competences' was circulated to around 70 organisations, so as to share experiences and views. "The interest was lukewarm" Danuta says and Folke Brolin, Project Coordinator, agrees. "Private actors are very focused on profit-making and did not want to participate in such a meeting, even though there were clearly qualitative benefits involved for them too".



Life Competence 50+, schematic overview of the DP activities

Undeterred, *Life Competence – a plus for 50+* managed to get two recognised organisations involved: one that had developed 'Meritportföljen' (qualifications portfolio) for the unemployed; and one that had developed an assessment model for those employed in the public sector. Danuta and the coaches met for a two-day brainstorming session to take on board the most useful

parts of both methods. The aim of the meeting was also to come up with new innovative ingredients specifically developed for the new approach 'Life Competence analysis'.

The result? A flexible method based on four steps that the 50+ participant discusses in individual sessions with a coach. The four steps are:

1. My situation now;
2. My recourses;
3. Possibilities in the labour market; and,
4. Action plan.

## ONE SMALL STEP...

The use of the method is tailored to the individual's circumstances, for example a more complete analysis will be undertaken with someone who is unemployed, whereas a 'light' version, comprising the first two steps, are considered sufficient for those already in employment. The complete four stage analysis is planned to take five weeks with nine hours of individual sessions with a coach, two group meetings per week and homework and reflection activities to do between the meetings. The group sessions are organised around specific themes and tasks, including: mentoring and support to businesses; establishing contacts; education; start-up of businesses; seminars; and, information about labour market trends.

Undertaking a life competence analysis is important for both the low-skilled and also those with higher level qualifications, such as Eva Nörringer, who participated in an earlier pilot group to test the method. Eva explains, "My company moved all their activities to another city I had both moved and travelled frequently earlier in my career but felt that now it was enough, I was not prepared to move again". This was two years ago. After she had made her decision, Eva worked in periods, but did not find work that made her 'tick'. "I wanted to change employment direction. In May 2006 I got the chance to be involved in a pilot group to test the approach. It was excellent! Not the least because the coach was very helpful and motivating. For example, as part of the competence analysis I was to explain my previous work experience, and wrote three lines about my six years experience as a Director of a major company in the clothes industry. 'But Eva', my coach said, 'is this really all you did during all that time?' For me, it was really an eye-opener and

increased my self-esteem tremendously!" Eva says enthusiastically. "Also the group sessions were very valuable" she adds. "When you are unemployed, you lose natural contacts with other adults even though you might have children and are perhaps not home alone".

After having completed the life competence analysis, Eva had compiled a big black portfolio with all her valuable experiences. Yes – all! The competence analysis is not restricted to experiences gained through education or work, but also looks at other activities such as being a sports trainer, sewing, gardening and even parenting! Perhaps such an activity can, together with some more formal training, form the basis of self-employment.

What happened to Eva? Shortly after she had completed the life competence analysis she was invited to five interviews and was very close to getting one of those jobs. Then she was offered start working for the *Life Competence 50+* project, as Recruitment coordinator for 50+ participants. This means that she acts as a link between the unemployed / those who want or need to change direction of their working life and businesses. "I want to let people know how valuable the life competence analysis is", Eva says, "and as I was previously unemployed I know their situation, I know the system and I have real knowledge of how difficult it can be to be over 50 and try to stay in work."

Eva is not the only one who has realised the benefits of this new approach. The Director of the Validation authority in Sweden has already been in touch with the project and has shown great interest in their assessment of generalist skills. "After the EQUAL project stops, we want to spread the approach we have developed both nationally and internationally" Danuta says. "The interest from the Director is not only very encouraging and motivating, but also a very important factor for the sustainability of our work. We will continue to test and improve our method on different pilot groups both within companies and the unemployed in spring 2007, and plan to have finalised the approach by June 2007."

## HELPING OTHERS TO FIND THE WAY

"What should a network centre for 50+ involve?" This question was posed to a number of unemployed 50+ living in four different municipalities in the Gothenburg area, namely Tjörn, Orust, Stenungsund and Ale. In Spring 2006 they participated in a working group to come up with proposals. Their discussions were organised around questions such as: *What do you want to find when entering a network centre? What types of meetings should be organised? How is it possible to actively engage participants and make the network centre a lively meeting point? Who should be present at a network centre?*



Graph outlining the contents of a network centre for unemployed people.

The overall vision of the network centre was built on the idea of an arena where unemployed, new businesses, employers, employment councillors and the social security service could meet. It was centred on the principle of empowering participants, allowing them to establish contacts with the different interest groups that will be present at the centre. It was also envisaged that

ongoing evaluation of each activity would ensure continuous updates and improvements to the ways of working, structure, as well as content of the centre.

Framed by this overall vision, the (above) 50+ working group came up with a proposal for the content of the network centre activities, e.g. information about job trends / techniques; rules and contracts; mentor / support / inspiration; making contacts; documentation of competences; learn new things; start your own business workshops; and, seminars. The focus is now on *how* such a network centre will work. As part of an initial test, the focal point of this work will be on the unemployed and problem based learning, i.e. to make the individual aware that there is something new to learn and become motivated to find information about various topics.



The *Life Competence 50+* project has also recently started an activity where unemployed 50+ provide support to new businesses based on their own experiences. For example, Carina Folkesson, working at the Enterprise Agency and Annemarie Särner, working for the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, have interviewed new start-up businesses (i.e. up to three years old) about their needs for mentoring and administrative support. The reason for concentrating on this type of business was that many businesses face obstacles through their initial three year period. In particular the one year anniversary seems to be a critical period for many businesses. The interviews conducted by Carina and Annemarie resulted in a list of 17 businesses that need assistance in various areas, including economy, Public Relations and creating websites. By November 2006, the pairing up of unemployed 50+ individuals and start-up businesses was completed. It is planned that the mentoring / support activities will start very soon.

## IMPACT BEYOND EQUAL

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*"I do not think that we are the only ones who wonder what will happen after EQUAL" says Anders östebo, coordinator at the National Institute for Working Life - one of the Partner organisations in Life Competence – a plus for 50+. "Not only is it very important to take stock of all those very valuable and innovative approaches that have been developed under EQUAL and spread them to decision-makers around Europe to ensure their continuation. It is also imperative to build on and further develop the methods and tools that are the result of many working hours by dedicated EQUAL project staff in all EU countries".*



Woman who got a job with the help of the Partnership

*Life Competence 50+* decided that action was the best solution to deal with the dilemma of how to ensure the mainstreaming and continuing development of EQUAL practices. The Partnership will therefore organise a large-scale European conference on 18 to 20 June 2007 involving 500 EQUAL projects, decision-makers and researchers – the ratio of various stakeholder groups is still to be decided. By using the EQUAL database, the

project has compiled a list with contact details to 220 EQUAL projects that are active in the area of age management. These projects will all be invited to showcase and discuss their experiences with other EQUAL practitioners, 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 create new transnational partnerships.

Anders Östebo is clear about the possible benefits of this approach, *"This would 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!"*

The Partnership is aiming high, and hopes to involve high-level decision-makers at national and EU levels. *"Age management is a burning issue, with the current trends towards a higher proportion of and older people, which will put big pressure on the national social security systems once they retire", Anders östebo says. "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."*

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Link to the ECDB: Life competence - a plus for 50+ ([SE-91](#))

[1] [www.scb.se/statistik/BE/AA9999/2003M00/BE90SÅ9901\\_04.pdf](http://www.scb.se/statistik/BE/AA9999/2003M00/BE90SÅ9901_04.pdf)

[2] COM(2006) 571 final of 12.10.2006: The demographic future of Europe – from challenge to opportunity.

[3] COM(2006) 571 final of 12.10.2006: The demographic future of Europe – from challenge to opportunity.

[4] Legislation on age discrimination in Sweden is currently in preparation. This will make it possible for people to work as long as they are physically and psychologically capable.

[5] The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise is a pro-business interest organisation representing close to 54,200 Swedish companies. It consists of 50 trade and employer association members, with a 1.6 million labour force covering 70% of the Swedish private sector.

[6] The 15 affiliates together have about 1,831,000 members of whom approximately 839,115 are women.