

BUILDING ON DIVERSITY - PERSUADING SMES TO HIRE "NON-NATIVE" AND OLDER PEOPLE

A Belgian project that started as a response to the problem of the continued employment of older workers has found that the approaches and techniques that it is testing are equally, if not more, important in identifying job opportunities for people from ethnic minority and migrant communities.

AIMS AND BACKGROUND OF THE DP



The original proposal for this project involved just three partners. The initial contact came from a self-employed consultant working with an organisation called Europlus. Europlus approached IDEA Consult to discuss the possibility of developing a project that would attempt to (re) - integrate older people into the labour market. The need for such a project was pretty obvious as in 1999, only 25% of people in the age group of 55 - 64 were in employment in Flanders. This was a much lower employment rate than most other EU countries - for example the corresponding rate for Sweden was 64%.

IDEA Consult then set about developing the EQUAL Development Partnership. The third partner to be added was Randstad - a temporary employment agency. Randstad had already had considerable experience of placing older people but this had mainly been with larger companies. The project was particularly interested in considering how to involve more SMEs and while it was recognised that this might prove to be difficult and costly, SMEs represented an untapped potential to provide jobs and work placements.

The Project's Evolution
 As things progressed, the DP began to change in both composition and emphasis. Europlus left the project partnership, while two other important players came on board:

- Vitamine W - an NGO that had good contacts, and experience of working, with the target groups;
- VDAB - the Flemish Public Employment Service

It was also decided to locate the project in Antwerp where Randstad had an office already working with the 45+ age group and with ethnic minorities and migrants. At the outset of the project, it was felt that some of the jobs that might be suitable for older re-entrants might also offer employment opportunities for people from ethnic minority backgrounds and the base in Antwerp led to more contact with this target group. This, in turn, was reflected in the change of the project's name to Paradox and the design of an attractive and colourful logo, which is simply a picture of "jelly-beans" but, at the same time, represents the DP's focus on diversity with respect to both age and racial origin.

The DP now employs three full-time counsellors whose work is supervised by a manager from Ranstad and by a Project Steering Group that comprises two people from each of the partners in the DP. In addition, its activities are supported by a group of experts from:

- The City of Antwerp;
- The Antwerp Sub-Regional Employment Committee;
- The Belgian Federal Ministry of Employment;
- The Belgian Federation of the Self-Employed;

- The Chamber of Commerce (Antwerp Region);
- The Federation of Moroccan Organisations;
- An independent consultant on age management

This expert group meets two or three times each year and apart from the advice that it offers, it is an important vehicle for disseminating the most relevant messages and outcomes of the project

ACTIVITIES AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The DP is using a demand-oriented approach to labour market integration and in order to realise its main objective of increasing the employment rates of older and "non-native" people, it has established four operational objectives, namely:

1. Awareness raising of SMEs in relation to the employment of "non-native" people and people who are over 45;
2. Development of a methodology for awareness raising of SMEs and for approaching and engaging the target groups of older and "non-native" jobseekers;
3. Engaging, matching and guidance of jobseekers and employers in order to create permanent employment;
4. Dissemination and communication of the results and methodology to labour market stakeholders and the government institutions

The Services of Paradox

In terms of its awareness raising, the DP appears to be quite successful. Most contacts with SME's take place through a personal visit of one of the counsellors. Access to companies, even on the basis of this "cold-calling", seems to be relatively easy and employers are willing to share their experiences that relate to older or "non-native" workers. The counsellor is also able to explain that there is a range of benefits or services that the DP can offer including better matching, advice on existing employment measures and guidance for the employer and the prospective employee. These counsellors are available to help candidates with the application process and then continue to provide on-going support and evaluation. The DP asks a fee from employers for these services and this is seen as an approach that might aid the replication or transfer of the project's methodology in the future. The mid-term evaluation of the DP has pointed up the importance of face-to-face contact and of on-going communication with employers.

The DP also works on the identification of vacancies and adopts a proactive approach to the filling of these positions. Firstly, it analyses vacancies advertised in newspapers and web sites and then contacts the respective companies with an offer of help in finding suitable candidates. Secondly, companies are mailed with details of people from the target groups who are seen to have strong CVs.

The partners are learning a lot as the project progresses. They are now much more aware of the need to respond speedily to demands from employers and of the types of skills, attitudes and personal qualities that employers require from would-be employees. On the other hand, the guidance and support of the job seeker or new worker is recognised as being equally important in creating the conditions for sustained employment.

From the Pilot to the Implementation Phase

However, the DP continues to face two main difficulties. In the current economic climate vacancies are very scarce and there is increased competition between those who are looking for a job. There is also a mismatch between the demand i.e. the skills required by employers and the supply i.e. the skills that the two target groups possess. It seems to be easier to match ethnic minorities with jobs, primarily because there are still SMEs that have a range of lower-skilled jobs on offer that older workers are unwilling to accept. In terms of finding individuals to match with the white-collar vacancies within SMEs, it is difficult to find "non-natives" and also older people with requisite higher education and training, at least through the channels that are currently available to the DP.

By September 2003, which was the end of the year-long pilot phase, a total of 20 people had been placed in positions. Of these:

- 12 were "non-natives" under the age of 45;
- 4 were "non-natives" over the age of 45;
- 4 were natives over the age of 45

The DP is hopeful that the implementation phase that started in November 2003 will reach larger numbers from each of the target groups. It is also hopeful that this phase will be extended. The official closing date for the project is May 2004 but the Flemish Authorities are currently considering a request that the project should continue to next November.

The hopes of reaching larger numbers can to an extent be justified by an initiative that the project mounted on 16 October 2003. It brought over 50 SMEs together with the DP's partners and experts to present a phased model in companies' attitudes to diversity. The meeting was also attended by the Head of Cabinet of the Flemish Employment Ministry who expressed the support of the Ministry for this type of policy development. An important aspect of the event was the fact that employers who had had positive experiences of employing people from ethnic minority or older groupings were pleased to testify to the benefits of hiring such workers. In addition, the DP now has the Paradox newsletter up and running that is designed for, and targeted at, employers.

Transferability

IDEA Consult, the coordinating organisation, firmly believes that the methodology that is being developed in this EQUAL project will be capable of being transferred to the wider labour market. In particular, it envisages the model being used by other actors in the field of labour market mediation and in other geographical regions and it feels that its methods and insights could also be used to assist other target groups such as people with disabilities.

At the end of the project, the methodology will be described in a handbook, which will be a general report on the activities of the DP and two other manuals will also be produced. The first will be targeted at employers and will contain techniques and a number of practical tips related to hiring a person from either of the target groups. The second publication will be aimed at counsellors and other professionals who play intermediary or mediation roles in the labour market. In addition to the production of these written documents, the dissemination of the methodology and project experiences will be organised through events such as presentations, workshops and final conferences, which will take place at both transnational and national levels

It is also intended that the results and learning effects of the project will be transmitted to policy makers through the Flemish Employment Ministry, the Federal Employment Ministry and the efforts of members of the DP's expert group. It is hoped that this will lead to the mainstreaming of Paradox's methodology in both national and Flemish policy measures.

But what is so special about this project that its methodology stands a chance of being replicated throughout Belgium? There are three points that have already been mentioned but perhaps have not been sufficiently highlighted and these explain why the conception and the operation of this DP are both innovative in its national situation.

Firstly, Paradox is focussed on SMEs. These small, local firms or family businesses do not have Human Resource Departments nor are they particularly concerned or interested in concepts such as Corporate Social Responsibility. Thus, a different and often more personal approach must be adopted if the people in charge of these companies are to be convinced that they should review their recruitment policies and consider employing older and "non-native" persons. This requires extra efforts if these managers are to understand that individuals from these target groups actually possess relevant skills and competences and extra explanations if the managers are to be made aware of the grants, subsidies or allowances that are available to support the employment and/or training of individuals from these groups.

Secondly, the DP aims to improve existing methods and to complement them with newly developed techniques. It starts with a demand-oriented approach, which assumes that the requirement of the employer is the most important criterion. This has important implications for

those public and voluntary agencies that are concerned with the social and professional (re) - integration of older or "non-native" people. These agencies are learning about what employers consider to be important and also how to use this knowledge to assess the employment potential of their clients or members.

Finally, the development of this methodology would not have been possible without the composition of the partnership itself. Operational partnerships of public bodies, private firms and NGOs are relatively rare in Flanders. This partnership style of working has been enhanced by the links that Paradox has established with the Diversity Action Plans of the Flemish Government and with Active 50+ which is an ESF project run by the VDAB and, also of course, by its EQUAL transnational activities.

TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION

Paradox works in a transnational partnership with two other EQUAL-projects, namely [Senior Professionals at Work](#) (the Netherlands) and [OVER45](#) (Italy). This partnership focuses on the situation of older people, rather than on issues concerned with ethnic minority or migrant groupings. The activities include:

- A Website www.over45.org with all relevant information about the project;
- A Database of good practices.
- A Newsletter on the progress of the project;
- Workshops and theme days

One of the themes that the partnership has been looking at is "mentorship" and, of course, this theme has a transversal application.

INVOLVEMENT IN ETG1

The DP is not directly involved with any of the Working Groups of ETG1. There are elements of its activities that are relevant to WG1: The Involvement of Employers, as well as to WG5: Ethnic Minorities and Migrants.

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Link to DP website : <http://www.ideaconsult.be> This web site contains a brief description of the project under the labour and socio-economy section of the Information Centre.

Link to [EQUAL database description](#)