

# Tapping the employment potential of SMEs

The Flemish labour market is marked by two particular problems – the relatively low number of older people in employment and the high jobless rate among migrants. In 2003, only 42.4% of those aged 50-64 were in work, compared to 52.9% for the EU-15 as a whole. Meanwhile, the unemployment rate for non-EU nationals resident in Belgium was 25.3%, compared to 4.5% for those with Belgian nationality.

Tackling these issues is therefore driving the Flemish Government's diversity policy. Its main priorities are to encourage cooperation between sectors, invest in the social economy to create subsidised jobs, promote equal opportunity policies and support organisations in developing their own diversity policies. In the case of migrants, there is also a political will to ensure proportional labour market participation by 2010, so that their rates of employment reflect the percentage of the population that they represent.

## A personal approach to small businesses

The Paradox Development Partnership (DP) is unique in Belgium as it exclusively targets SMEs to realise its main objective of increasing the employment rates of older people and migrants. These small, local firms or family businesses do not have human resource departments and are not very aware of or interested in concepts like Corporate Social Responsibility. A different and often more personal approach is needed to convince them to review their recruitment policies and consider employing more older people and migrants.

This DP has therefore established contacts with SMEs through a personal visit by one of three counsellors employed in the project. Access to companies has proved relatively easy and employers are willing to share their experiences with older or "non-native" workers. The DP offers a range of support services including better matching, advice on existing employment measures and guidance for the employer and the prospective employee. The counsellors are also available to help candidates with the application process and then continue to provide on-going support and monitoring.

Inan Ureyil, who has a Turkish background, started a placement with EXKI making and selling sandwiches. He

*"found it very positive that the Paradox-consultants call me or visit me from time to time in order to see how things are going. In case of problems, I can always go back to them and even if I have no problems, I can always visit their office for a short talk."*

## Action plan for diversity

The EQUAL project has produced a guide for employers that outlines how to create a Diversity Action Plan. And through direct contacts with SMEs and analysis of jobs adverts, Paradox identified a total of 320 vacancies and 130 placements for members of its target groups. In filling 40% of the vacancies, its placement rates were higher than the public employment service and other employment projects. Over half of these placements have led to more permanent employment.

To promote its success, Paradox has organised events where employers with positive experiences of recruiting people from ethnic minority or older age groups have testified to the benefits of hiring such workers. Similarly, the DP has produced a newsletter designed for and targeted at employers in general. In addition, the project's methodology, results and learning effects have been described in a handbook. A second publication is targeted at counsellors and other professionals who play intermediary or mediation roles in the labour market.

The partnership was developed gradually. The first to join was Randstad – a temporary employment agency with experience of placing older people but mainly in larger companies. Then, as things progressed two other important players came on board: Vitamine W – an NGO that had good contacts with the migrant community – and VDAB – the Flemish Public Employment Service.

From an early stage, it was decided to keep the partnership as small and as manageable as possible but, at the same time, the four partners realised that they would need some external help. Their solution was to establish a group of experts including the city council, employment ministry, local chambers of commerce and a migrant association.

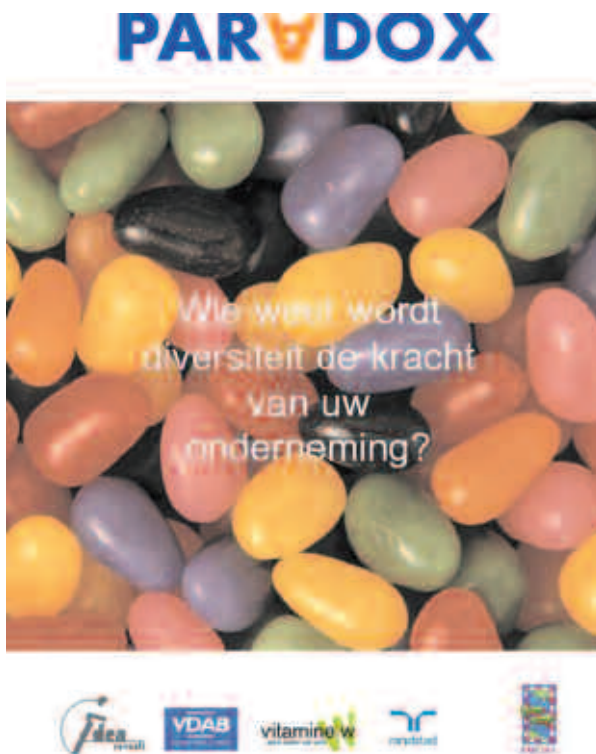
## Expertise can help build credibility

This group of experts provided the DP with credibility and contacts, co-financing, advice on the overall direction and a testing ground for its pilot outputs. Through the group, the Antwerp Sub-Regional Employment Committee became aware of the DP's success in helping SMEs draw up Diversity Action Plans and now promotes the DP's approach to other Employment Committees.

The EQUAL project's innovative form of partnership was one of the keys to its success. It managed to bring together a group of high profile organisations – across the public, private and voluntary sectors – who would otherwise have had few opportunities to work together on this scale.

IDEA Consult, the managing organisation of this EQUAL DP, is convinced that its methodology will be transferred to the wider labour market. The methods and tools will be disseminated throughout Flanders by the Public Employment Service (VDAB) as well as the Sub-Regional Employment Committees and will also be promoted by the Belgian Federation of the Self-Employed. In addition, the results of the project will be transmitted to policy makers in the Flemish and the Federal Employment Ministries. Finally, its outcomes will be presented on the European stage, as Paradox will be featured in a book called "DiverCities" to be published later this year by ENGIME, a Network of Excellence in the EU's Fifth Framework Research Programme.

A more detailed version and other EQUAL success stories can be found at: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/equal/activities/search\\_en.cfm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/activities/search_en.cfm)



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**Contact details:**  
Anneleen Peeters  
IDEA Consult  
Congresstraat 37/41 bus 3  
B-1000 Brussel  
Tel: +32 2 282 17 75  
E-mail: [anneleen.peeters@ideaconsult.be](mailto:anneleen.peeters@ideaconsult.be)  
Website: [www.ideaconsult.be](http://www.ideaconsult.be)

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