

NEVER TOO OLD TO BUILD A FUTURE

In France, people tend to retire much earlier than the official legal retirement age of 65, on average as early as 57.5! This causes severe problems in some sectors, where the number of people entering the workforce is substantially lower than the number of people leaving employment. An example of a sector in serious difficulty is the building industry, with 1 out of 5 employees over 50 and with a need for the annual recruitment of around 65,000 persons, due to the high retirement rate, other persons leaving the sector and young people being less and less interested in working in construction. If this trend persists, it is estimated that in the next five



The French building industry, with 1 out of 5 employees over 50, is facing serious difficulties

years the staff over 50 will represent 25% of those employed in the sector. Companies are therefore increasingly looking at ways to encourage those over 50 to stay in work until the normal retirement age.

The European Employment Strategy specifically promotes the concept of “active ageing” and a lifecycle approach to work, notably through improving the “negative” working conditions which lead to early retirement. Actions launched focus on the removal of incentives encouraging early retirement, an emphasis on health and safety aspects in sectors where these are often at risk and improving access to continuing training. Given demographic change in the EU, age management is an increasingly important component of the EU’s wider objectives relating to improve quality and productivity at work as well as social cohesion and inclusion.

TEAMING UP FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

The *AGES et TRAVAIL dans le BTP* (Ages and work in the public construction sector) Development Partnership (DP) recognised the urgency to respond to declining numbers of workers in the building industry and brought together a group of organisations with a high potential to combat and possibly reverse this negative trend. The DP is led by the National Association for Adult Professional Training (AFPA), a leading public vocational training organisation in France and involves the French Building Federation (FFB) and some local partners. Being the main employers’ organisation in the sector, FFB’s participation ensures direct contact and influence on construction and construction-related (e.g. electricians, painters) companies throughout the country.

“This project has built an ideal partnership: an employers’ organisation from a relevant sector and a large public vocational training provider linked to occupational health. This is a good asset for the project and a guarantee of wide dissemination of good practices, methods and experiments. It is interesting that the project focuses on the management of workers over 45,” explained the EQUAL coordinator within the French Ministry of Labour, Paul Medus.

Together, the partners decided that *AGES et TRAVAIL* would place a strong focus on strengthening and further developing the skills and abilities of older workers, and on developing new work opportunities which would take account of their wealth of experience gained on the job. In order to not lose these valuable experiences through early retirement, the DP also recognised the need to promote intergenerational solidarity and learning. Young people sometimes show little respect for older workers, as they consider them “out of touch” with the modern world, and old-fashioned. Little do they realise that older people have “real-life” experiences and knowledge which cannot be learned from books or at school, and that transmitting such knowledge to the younger generation can only be highly beneficial on both a personal and company level.

INNOVATIVE WAYS TO PROMOTE THE EXPERTISE OF SENIOR EMPLOYEES

How can older workers feel and be more appreciated and, more importantly, how can they be encouraged to keep working? *AGES et TRAVAIL* focused primarily on highlighting the value of their experience and on increasing their image within their companies. To achieve these aims, it was important to first gain a better understanding of how companies deal with older workers. For the first time in France, the DP conducted a nation-wide survey to map the people and career management structures and processes of nearly 2,700 companies in the building sector. The survey was followed up with more than 60 in-depth case studies involving managers and employees to further research and confirm the findings of the national review. The follow-up looked in particular at identifying whether there were any specific “types” of older workers more likely to become excluded and which methods companies used to train senior employees.

The mapping exercise provided evidence of what most already expected. Both at political and company level, there is a tendency to concentrate more on the development of young people, which has restricted the learning and career opportunities for the older generations. On the other hand, the interest of older workers in further training was also substantially lower, and their age caused several physical and cultural problems that decreased their productivity. On the positive side, however, the survey highlighted the much higher skill levels of senior employees, and increased workplace safety that resulted.



AGES ET TRAVAIL mapped management structures and processes of nearly 2,700 companies

AGES et TRAVAIL used both the positive and negative findings of their study to develop experimental approaches to better manage the skills of older workers and to ensure that their expertise can be effectively transferred to their younger colleagues. These included diagnosis and advice services to companies to assist managers to map the skills base of their current employees and to find more efficient ways of hiring new staff while matching skills gaps and needs. Companies were often surprised by the high level of skills they already had in-house and felt encouraged to offer better positions to senior employees. Older workers were also successfully involved in the recruitment process and provided advice on what was important to look for in a new staff member.

The DP also developed “collective team” working methods and workshop techniques, which put experienced workers and new recruits together and helped them to jointly identify the most important skills required by the job and the best ways to transfer and share these. Finally, *AGES et TRAVAIL* advised companies on how some simple adjustments to the working environment could greatly improve the comfort of the work place for older workers.

Christian Soubre, head of a masonry, carpentry and roofing company of 20 workers (4 over 45, and 4 over 50 year of age) said: *“I worked out solutions with a consultant for each ageing worker. I named a “super tutor” to manage teams made up of seniors and young people. I wanted the staff’s knowledge to remain inside the company so I encouraged the senior tutors by giving them a special status. Everybody is satisfied. It is a long term strategy for attracting and retaining newcomers and older workers”.*

The new approaches tested by the DP meant for older workers have certainly given a new impetus to a sector that until recently was considered as traditional and conservative. The innovative methods helped to introduce new principles of human resource management, such as maximising the use of existing skills and abilities, team working and recognition of prior learning. By promoting dynamic ways to manage and recruit people, and by encouraging dialogue and a sharing of learning between generations, *AGES et TRAVAIL* not only boosted the mobility and empowerment of the aged workforce, but also strongly improved the image of older workers. Companies cannot but embrace the new practices, as they help to successfully and economically tackle the common problem of the ageing workforce, something which only a short time ago seemed far from possible.

“Through EQUAL, we have created much better working conditions and helped companies to successfully put these into practice. *AGES et TRAVAIL* created a model which can be easily

transferred to other regions and sectors” said Thierry Rosenzweig, the AFPA European project manager.

CONSTRUCTING STRONG TRANSNATIONAL TIES – USING SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCES IN OTHER CONTEXTS

France is not the only country that has to deal with demographic change, an ageing workforce and an increasingly overloaded social security system. Other countries in the EU are affected by similar trends and are also looking at ways to reverse these. *AGES et TRAVAIL* realised from the very start that it would be important to learn from approaches taken in other national and sectoral contexts. For this purpose, they joined the WISER transnational partnership, standing for “Workers Integration through Skill development and Experience Recognition”.

WISER includes *AGES et TRAVAIL*, *Building London Creating Futures*, an English DP working on employment creation and *FAIR*, a German DP promoting the adaptability of individuals and companies. The three partners came together as they were all facing a common challenge: How to improve the adaptability of disadvantaged groups, such as older and low-qualified workers, in the labour market? All three were also developing approaches to retain employees, and to increase their skills.

The start-up phase of WISER was dedicated to the establishment of a transnational strategy, as well as good and effective communication links and a clear distribution of roles and tasks. The first joint activity of the transnational partnership was the development of a comparative study looking at the demographic changes and situation of older workers in each country. WISER also organised a series of conferences to raise awareness of new approaches with regard to age management, during which each partner presented its main activities and results to an audience of company managers and decision makers from regional and local authorities.



The work place coordinator has an “on-the-work-floor” human resource function

But WISER was not only created to compare country situations and to raise awareness: the three partners were genuinely and seriously interested in sharing and learning from each others’ successful approaches to keeping workers in employment. For this purpose, they thoroughly analysed and commented on the different methods and programmes that each DP was putting into place, and provided “external” feedback and views which were actually considered of great benefit by those responsible for their development. Each of the partners then decided which of the practices they wanted to test in their own context.

AGES et TRAVAIL opted for testing the concept of the “Work Place Coordinator” developed by the *Building London Creating Futures* DP, an “on-the-work-floor” human resource function. The method was adapted to the French context by the Midi Pyrenean region and several companies in this region following a study visit to London. By using the “Work Place Coordinator”, *AGES et TRAVAIL* hoped to improve the recruitment and training of people in the building sector and to retain them within the company. The coordinator acted as both a mentor for staff, with the aim of bringing together the older and the new generation of workers, and was responsible for liaison and mediation with “third” parties, such as training organisations and social partners. Despite some positive results following the English approach, results in France did not meet initial expectations. Most of the French new recruits were hired through one-year training contracts and were not willing to stay once they completed their vocational programme.

From the German partner *FAIR*, *AGES et TRAVAIL* adopted a workshop methodology for on-the-job training in SMEs. *FAIR* helped experienced workers and new staff to jointly identify skills that are most important for certain jobs and the best ways for passing these skills on from present to new employees. The workshop approach helped the transfer of team skills and proved to be very effective when tested by *AGES et TRAVAIL*. The method included three modules, each module consisting of a workshop of three hours. The first module was animated by a senior staff member

in the company and a trainer from AFPA. It set the scene for debate on a specific theme, such as “What kind of skills are necessary for a specific task in the workplace?” or “How can we improve working conditions in a certain area of the company?” The group, consisting of employees, were invited to exchange their first views on the subject. For the second workshop, the workers were left “on their own” to discuss the theme and to come up with suggestions and solutions. The last module focused on reaching joint conclusions and decisions on the questions posed at the start.

The workshop method has helped participants understand what each person does within the company and has helped them learn from each other’s experiences. From a company perspective, the method is of interest as it is highly cost-effective: with staff spending just a bit more than one day of their time, and with the assistance of only one external trainer, huge steps are taken towards a better understanding and intergenerational learning of the company’s workforce. Some training of senior staff members is required to run the modules, but once this is done, he or she can easily pass this knowledge on to another colleague. Both training institutes and companies have expressed a strong interest in the workshop method, and the approach can easily be applied to other sectors.

These two examples show the core value of transnational collaboration. EQUAL acts as a “melting pot” for good practices, from which projects can take and adapt approaches to apply in their own contexts. Whilst a success in most cases, others DPs found out through a minor investment, that some practices simply do not work in their context.

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