

A NEW APPROACHE TO TRANSFERRING KNOW-HOW

Like many other industrialised countries, France is facing the progressive ageing of its population. This trend will certainly get worse in the next few years as birth rates keep dropping and life expectancy continues to rise. In this context, promoting active ageing and policies to foster the employability of the over 50-year olds have to be considered as priority goals.

Nevertheless, the number of people taking part in job-related training activities in France is low in comparison to other northern European countries. French policy in this area is targeted at young people, with 14% of training programmes designed for people aged between 25 and 34, and only 3% for those between 55 and 64. In contrast, in other countries such as the UK, Denmark and Sweden, the percentage of older workers benefiting from learning opportunities varies from 10% to 15%. In this context, the Part'@ge project aims to promote lifelong learning opportunities to improve the working conditions of senior workers while enhancing their skills and technical knowledge.

Part'@ge works within the guidelines set up in 1999 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, which aim to tackle age barriers and foster a good environment for the development of senior workers' potential. The activities of the DP are also linked to the objectives of the European Employment Strategy, which promotes the concept of "active ageing" and stronger social cohesion.

OLD INDUSTRIES ADDRESSING NEW CHALLENGES



Partage addresses the challenges of ageing workers in the milk sector

The objective of Part'@ge is to encourage reflection on how companies faced by an ageing workforce can develop intergenerational cooperation and the transfer of know-how. The Development Partnership (DP) is led by the *Pierre Mendès France University in Grenoble* (UPMF) which works with companies linked to *Sodiaal*, the French Milk Board, which produces 2,600 million litres of milk per year and is known to the wider public through brands such as Yoplait, Candia, and Riches-Monts. The companies linked to the Part'@ge project are located in the Rhone-Alpes region and work in the agriculture industry, a sector facing growing difficulties as far as the ageing of the working population is concerned.

Companies such as *Candia* and *Orlac* also have to deal with economic challenges: the dropping of the price of milk due to increased competition and the requirements of the Common Agricultural Policy have forced them to reduce the cost of the workforce. As a result, it is even more important for them to help older workers adapt to the use of new machinery and build up their know-how, while transferring knowledge to other workers. Putting in place age management strategies and foreseeing the early retirement of older workers is the only way to increase productivity and performance for these companies.

"It is essential to offer to ageing workers the possibility to evolve within the company in order to avoid the loss of valuable skills. It is a matter of adaptability, training and career management." Explains Marie-Antoniette Blondin, who is responsible for vocational training within Candia.

Nevertheless, dealing with ageing workers is not easy: agricultural companies usually focus on short-term problems (market constraints, new policies, dropping of milk prices...), while age management goals have to be seen with a long-term view. Putting in place training activities for

senior workers requires developing good communication strategies, based on strong and convincing arguments. Older workers are often difficult to motivate: they lack confidence to take on new learning possibilities and are sceptical about extending their working life. Some decide to take advantage of early retirement schemes (according to the Fillon law), which allows workers to retire before the age of 60.

HOW THEN TO OVERCOME THESE OBSTACLES AND FIND SOLUTIONS FOR AGEING WORKERS?

Part'@ge developed successful strategic solutions which were adapted not only to each company but also to each sector and worker within the company. In order to fully understand the specific problems of companies, their in-house potential and to come forward with the right solutions, the DP started with an in-depth examination of the internal structure and a broad analysis of the workforce of the four companies taking part in Part'@ge's activities: Candia, Orlac and TOS (linked to the milk production sector) as well as Agri sud-est (a company specialised in retailing of farming products). Looking at each company's internal features was the first step to designing tailor-made training programmes responding to real needs and using feasible, low-cost learning methods. The in-depth analysis situated the four companies in their local context, pointing out the regional labour market developments and trends and profiled the workforce, highlighting the hierarchic structure and the added value brought by each worker within the enterprise).

The analysis was based interviews held both with managers and employees. The interviews revealed a clear determination on the part of managers to build up the know-how of more experienced workers and to transfer this to younger ones. Interviews with employees helped to better understand their role and tasks within the company as well as the fears they have concerning the future. As a result of these consultations, Part'@ge understood much better the expectations of both management and workers, and was able to develop communication and training methods that seamlessly fitted the needs and potential of each company.



“Part'@ge's experience showed the importance of adapting training activities to the characteristics of the company. Each step was supported by an in-

Candia is a milk producer with a workforce of 216 employees, 49% of whom are aged 45 and over

depth study of the company's history, existing tasks and competences as well as the evolution related to technology and modernisation. The analysis phase has allowed the identification of the main problems faced by senior workers and of the skills which will be transferred to the younger generation,” said Bruno Lamotte, labour economist of the UPMF.

By incorporating tailor-made training activities for senior workers, this EQUAL project has injected a new impulse into a very traditional and conservative sector. The impact created by Part'@ge was very positive as activities targeted at senior workers were organised with the specific working context and existing social ties in mind. The approach chosen has fostered the productivity of agricultural companies by helping them face and tackle the problems of modernisation and the need to help adapt their aged workforces to these changes, by making the best use of their own dynamics and resources.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE BETWEEN ALL AGES – AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH.

Up to now, most activities aimed at tackling the problem of ageing workers were developed in order to transfer skills from the older generation to the younger one. Part'@ge wants to reverse this one-sided approach by developing a real and concrete exchange of expertise across generations. The DP has set up a tutoring scheme where younger workers can take advantage of the experience of senior workers while at the same time sharing their knowledge of information

technology and new products. This crosswise sharing of skills and abilities is aimed at fostering the professional development of workers of both age groups.

What are the concrete results of this practice? The experiences of the 77 beneficiaries over 45 working at Candia perfectly illustrate the success of the mentoring methodology set up by Part'@ge. Based in Vienne (Rhône-Alpes region), Candia is a company producing UHT milk with a workforce of 216 employees (49% of whom are aged 45 and over). The significant percentage of aged workers encouraged the managers and the Human Resources department to take advantage of the activities proposed by the EQUAL project.

In this context, a specialised training organisation was given the task of training a 40-year-old technician, responsible for the running of a machine used to fill milk cartons, so that he could become the new tutor. Training was aimed at building up the technical know-how of the employee and at transferring this formalised expertise to his colleagues. In other words, the beneficiary was first trained in a very precise way by adding new expertise to his existing know-how. The second part of the training scheme focussed on how the tutor could transfer the lessons learned to others through group sessions. Workshops involving 4-5 workers and led by the new tutor were subsequently organised within the company. These 3-day sessions were based on the description of several hypothetical situations and actions that the employees would put in place to solve the problems encountered. Through group discussions, the tutor acted as a link or bridge, transferring new knowledge and expertise to both the younger and the older generation.

“Before the launching of the Part'@ge project, employees were keeping their know-how without sharing it with others. Today, after the organisation of training sessions, things have changed: workers share their skills so that everyone can benefit.” Explained the technician-tutor working for Candia.



Exchanging good practices for collecting milk

Orlac, a company collecting the milk for Sodiaal, had the opportunity to benefit from similar experiences. Training sessions based on the innovative tutoring system were organised for lorry drivers to improve their performances (e.g. reduce milk loss during transport, decrease the gasoline consumed and the distance covered). Firstly, a small group of selected drivers were trained to become tutors, integrating to their know-how related to notions of security, prevention and cost-savings. Secondly the new tutors were charged with spreading their newly acquired knowledge to older and younger lorry drivers working within the company. Orlac's managers were very happy about

the results produced by this experience: the performance of drivers was actually improved and that was also showed by concrete figures.

As a result of the training sessions, Orlac developed for example a monitoring system to assess and manage the performance of each lorry driver in relation to the amount of milk lost between its retrieval from the farm and its delivery to Sodiaal. The system works on the basis of auto-evaluation, and encourages the drivers to limit milk spilt to less than 0.5 litres per transport. Entries made on the monitoring system show increased performance for nearly all workers, which ultimately leads to litres and litres of milk being saved for consumption each day!

The new 'bridging role' attributed to the tutor seems in the end to work very well. Positive results have been noticed as workers of different ages have the opportunity to participate in debates, share their views, good practices and effective solutions directly related to their tasks. The opening of this channel of communication allows a new equilibrium between generations and empowers workers, offering them new learning opportunities in a constructive and targeted way.

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