



# Towards a new culture of intergenerational work-based learning in European enterprises

## Survey results

Presented by the Project Partnership in August 2016

## Why Intergenerational Work-based Learning?

Intergenerational Learning (IGL) is a way in which people of all ages can learn together, from each other and about each other. IGL is an important aspect of Lifelong Learning, where different generations work together to gain knowledge, skills and competences. In the WINGS4success-Project, IGL is part of the generational management in companies, referring to the cooperation between people of different age groups in the workplace (work based learning). It has three main objectives: to maintain older employees' work ability so that they can remain in the company for longer and do not feel left behind; the systematic transfer of explicit and implicit knowledge between generations; and the successful integration of young employees in the interest of the best possible cooperation between generations as key factor for companies' success. The rationale behind WINGS4success is partly rooted in the need of the labor market to establish a new balance between generations in the workplace.



## Analysis: State of play in selected European SMEs

The combination of innovative approaches of the younger employees and the experience of the older colleagues are of high importance for a company's strategic and practical success. But how is intergenerational collaboration and knowledge transfer promoted within companies? In the framework of the EU project "Wings4Success", 127 enterprises in Austria, Germany, Spain and Portugal were questioned on the topic by means of an online survey and 45 structured expert interviews. Several and different organizations answered to the online survey and the participation of a great diversity of organisations showed that the topic is of interest across various business sectors and sizes; not only large but also smaller and medium-sized enterprises have to and want to confront the challenges posed by demographic change.



The participants of the online survey consisted of micro- and small enterprises (1-49 employees), medium-sized enterprises (50-249 employees), and larger enterprises (250-500 employees) as well as large companies (500 employees and more). The findings from the survey serve to create a status report and to shed light on the value and standing of intergenerational thinking and acting in businesses.



With a focus on small and medium-sized enterprises, the collected needs and requirements of companies as well as operational best-practice approaches by companies form the basis for the development of a vocational education training for “Intergenerational Learning at the Workplace” aimed at people working in personnel management, which will then be provided free of charge to all interested enterprises.

The results show that in-house knowledge and knowledge holders are seen as one of the most valuable resources a business has. Since there has been an increase in knowledge-

These obstacles to promote intergenerational work-based learning in SMEs were mentioned by interviewees:

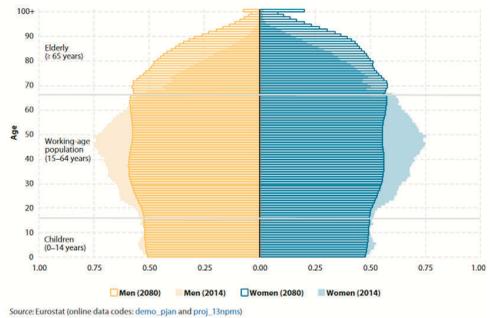
- *“Lack of time and resources”*
- *“Lack of understanding for age-related needs”*
- *“Job insecurity that make people keep their know-how to themselves”*
- *“Competition among generations instead of goal-oriented working”*

intensive processes in enterprises of all sizes, in both the service and the manufacturing sector, knowledge transfer between older and younger employees is crucial for many companies. When it comes to the question of how to organize this knowledge transfer between old and young, however, companies soon arrive at their limits. Especially small and medium-sized enterprises have only limited resources and know-how for the management of generationally bound knowledge.

“The promotion of intergenerational collaboration and knowledge transfer at the workplace poses a challenge for the surveyed businesses. Definite measures for the promotion of intergenerational learning at the workplace are still rare. However, companies are aware of the need for action, and they are also willing to act. Conscious guidance and management of intergenerational learning is deemed necessary.

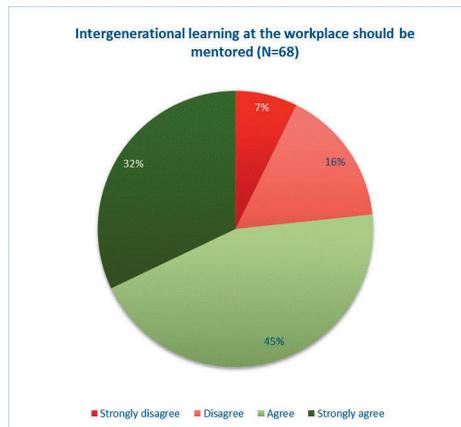
“The European employment strategy aims to support the Europe 2020 target to increase the employment rate of those aged 20–64 to at least 75 % by 2020; one means of doing so is to encourage older workers to remain in the workforce up to and beyond the minimum age to draw a pension. One of the seven flagship initiatives of the Europe 2020 strategy, the ‘Agenda for new skills and jobs’ has been designed to empower people by developing their skills, so as to improve their flexibility and security (flexicurity) in the working environment; it includes actions on life-long learning and e-skills.”<sup>1</sup>

Figure 3: Population pyramids, EU-28, 2014 and 2080 (% of total population)



In practice, however, the exchange of knowledge and experience is largely left to chance. Only seldom are there special incentive measures to motivate employees to proactively engage in an exchange of knowledge and experience. Businesses trust that employees will take it into their own hands and readily exchange in-house knowledge and experience. It is usually seen as the employees’ responsibility to gather information and acquire knowledge from other employees. Enterprises hope that employees actively exchange knowledge and experience of their own accord.

Only some companies said that a specially trained employee responsible for intergenerational learning at the workplace, who would act as a representative for intergenerational learning, would be practical. A formal, institutionalized approach is mostly rejected. Even though awareness of the implications and importance of in-house intergenerational communication is given, time and resources for a more thorough consideration of the topic are mostly not available, which is especially true for small enterprises.



<sup>1</sup> Source: Eurostat – Statistics explained on , online article based on Eurostat’s flagship publication “People in the EU: who are we and how do we live?”, found: 12th July 2016

Nevertheless, companies are keen on further training concerning Intergenerational Learning at the workplace. People with staff responsibilities in the companies should be made aware of and trained in how to promote intergenerational exchange of knowledge and experience at the workplace. What is central are the sensitization and training of executives concerning the following topics amongst others: heightened awareness of differences among the staff, generation-tailored performance appraisals, strengths and weaknesses of old and young, knowledge-oriented corporate culture and intergenerational learning processes. Furthermore, businesses would like to have the opportunity for an exchange among businesses (businesses learning from other businesses).

### How does WINGS4success promote intergenerational work-based learning (IGL)?



WINGS4success aims to address IGL in the workplace more systematically in SMEs. HR- Managers, owners, directors or special selected staff should be trained to promote and facilitate IGL in small and medium-sized companies. The aim is to strengthen IGL in companies. A specially trained intergenerational facilitator is meant to help to abolish the passive role of intergenerational processes in the company by representing an active part of the company's personnel policy. Furthermore, a toolbox with suitable IGL-methods and instruments for different SMEs, which can be regularly used by the IGL facilitator, will be developed within the project. The project

attempts to foster successful work-based knowledge transfer between the younger and the older generation by improving communication between the different generations in SMEs. The aim is to shape informal learning of different generations by "qualified facilitators" with newly developed instruments for work-based learning to foster in-house personnel development. Another aim of the project is to create improved awareness of the possibilities of intergenerational teaching and learning processes, and to provide qualification for possible multipliers within companies.

### Towards a culture of Intergenerational Learning in European SMEs - Recommendations

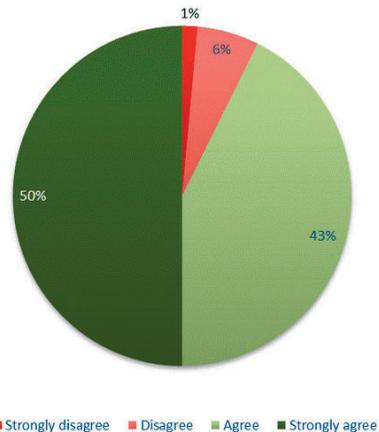
The results of the study show that the issue of intergenerational learning at the workplace, that is, the exchange of know-ledge and experience between generations in the business context, is becoming increasingly important due to current demographic changes in European businesses.

Especially when taking the ageing staff of many companies into account, intergenerational learning seems to be recognized in all investigated countries as a concept that can help find a solution to minimize loss of in-house knowledge and to utilize the experience of older employees. Companies showed special concern for the securing of in-house knowledge. However, the implementation of intergenerational learning at the workplace is a highly complex process that is hard to grasp and delineate, and therefore SMEs see it as a tremendous challenge.



The study clearly shows that work-based intergenerational learning in SMEs poses a common European challenge. Participants from across countries largely agreed in their views on and relation to the issue. Thus, meeting this challenge together by way of enabling the cross-border project Wings4success to look for a joint approach to the issue and exchange ideas would certainly be beneficial to finding a European solution (European added value). The design of a didactic-methodological training concept as well as the compilation of learning materials within the framework of Wings4success meets the needs of European enterprises.

**Human resources managers should be made aware of and trained in the area of intergenerational learning at the workplace (N=68)**



We can assume that the current demographic change will especially affect small and medium-sized businesses. In the competition for talented workers, they will draw the shorter straw. Thus, activities that help win and bind employees are more important than ever before. SMEs should therefore emphasize their strengths as employers.

Flat hierarchies, varied and responsible tasks, a strong orientation towards employees, and a family-friendly approach are what enable SMEs to score points in the competition for talent. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Source: Eurostat – Statistics explained on , online article based on Eurostat's flagship publication "People in the EU: who are we and how do we live?", found: 12th July 2016

*“Demographic change — together with geopolitical uncertainties, globalisation and climate change — is recognised as one of the most significant challenges currently facing Europe. In recent decades, the structure and profile of the EU’s population has changed considerably, due in part to: lower birth and fertility rates; changes in patterns of family formation; shifts in the roles of men and women; greater geographic mobility; higher levels of migration; and increases in life expectancy.”*

Furthermore, the issue of learning within organizations, including the intergenerational exchange of knowledge and experience, should be one of the top-three priorities of SMEs. The one and only right instrument for successful collaboration with and between different generations does not exist. However, there are a number of requirements that need to be considered for the effective realization of intergenerational learning processes.

At its core, intergenerational learning aims at promoting conditions allowing all participating generations to understand the other generations' views and opinions, thus profiting from the joint

learning activity. Generational differences should be seen as a business' strength. Knowing and recognizing intergenerational differences provide the first step towards the identification of the strengths and needs of each generation, and the allocation of the best suitable roles for each generation respectively, thus adapting the business to its socio-demographic environment and using the existing human resources to their fullest potential.

However, taking into account the existing diversity, the fact remains that promoting joint learning poses a considerable challenge. At the beginning of the process, what is required is a pro-active actor who can avail of organizational as well as financial support and has the needed know-how. In smaller businesses, these actors are usually the general managers themselves; in larger businesses, the HR managers or department heads take on this role.

While a common knowledge base concerning intergenerational learning is called for, in reality there is a great variety of methodological approaches and possible tools. A universally valid scheme for the implementation of activities and instruments does not exist. Among other things, field-specific challenges can play a role for businesses. Thus, companies face the task of having to create and apply a sustainable strategy suited to their respective specific needs and challenges.

The following **10 recommendations** should be seen as starting points to create the necessary external conditions for the promotion of intergenerational learning and thus the intergenerational exchange of knowledge and experience. They are based on the expert knowledge gained in the course of the Wings4success study and the results and experiences made of the former Grundtvig project IGLOO; they have not been tested for universal validity, nor does the author make any claims to completeness.

- 1. Get an overview of the employee- and age structure of the staff:** A detailed knowledge of the employee- and age structure of the staff is the necessary prerequisite for defining the company's need for action and for planning and initiating concrete measures.
- 2. Gain expert knowledge and exchange experiences regarding the many different aspects of demographic change on the company level:** Get to know and learn methods and instruments; exchange best-practice examples among businesses (learn from other businesses).
- 3. Identify and deconstruct barriers that hinder in-house intergenerational knowledge exchange:** e.g., lack of time, fear for one's own standing in the company, deliberate withholding of inside knowledge, exclusion of certain co-workers from ways of informal communication, etc.
- 4. Create the conditions for a ready passing-on of knowledge:** Personal initiative and willingness to share one's knowledge are in need of a nurturing environment: job preservation, recognition, a personal bond, trust, reciprocal appreciation and a sense of responsibility.
- 5. Promote the proactive, conscious dialogue between generations so as to avoid generational conflicts:** consciously examine the stereotypes and prejudices that are attributed to the different generations; introduce intergenerational discussions that aim to improve the reciprocal understanding and thus create awareness of the advantages of intergenerational collaboration and knowledge exchange in every single employee.
- 6. Create mixed-age teams on all levels and where-/whenever possible and appropriate.**
- 7. Create informal meeting spaces and learning opportunities:** Create space and time for informal conversations and meetings (e.g., a 'social corner', a community café, leisure activities, sports, cultural events, etc.), but also for independent informal learning.
- 8. Offer various forms of in-house formal learning and teaching** in order to establish an open learning culture within the company: Possible offers for such cooperative and communicative learning forms are, e.g., job rotation, know-how tandems, mentoring/partner models, communities of practice, blogs/intranet-share points, an in-house training market that aims to have employees teach and learn from each other. Here, the conscious activation of one's own experiential knowledge as well as the training of employees is central to successful intergenerational knowledge communication.
- 9. Take the needs of older employees into account:** targeted personnel work with ageing staff and an ageing-appropriate employment design; special appreciation of older experienced employees, e.g., integration of older employees into the company's problem-solving and decision-making processes; reduce learning barriers and promote learning motivation.
- 10. Systematize 'competition-critical' knowledge safeguarding and knowledge communication, develop the respective tools and thus create a knowledge-oriented corporate culture:** determine and evaluate 'competition-critical' knowledge of employees on a regular basis. Special emphasis should be laid on knowledge transfer concerning key players, carriers of critical competitive knowledge.

Overall, the consortium recommends integrating intergenerational learning into companies' general business strategies and nominating a representative for in-house intergenerational learning, who receives appropriate training. Such a formalization of intergenerational learning allocates the appropriate attention to the issue, thus enabling companies to act and deal with intergenerational learning more efficiently and successfully.

To put these recommendations into practice, the project will generate the following results:

- Designing a qualification profile for the facilitator of IGL at the workplace;
- Developing the facilitator's toolbox to support the promotion of the IGL in SMEs, which includes consulting tools, teaching and training material, good practice examples, useful links etc.
- Training curricula and guidelines for their application for the facilitator of IGL.

All project materials are to be found gradually on the projects' website. Are you interested in sharing your experiences or actively engaging yourself in the project? Please follow the activities on our website or directly contact us: **[www.wings4success.eu](http://www.wings4success.eu)**.



Published by:  
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August 2016

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