

EUROCOMMERCE AND UNI EUROPA COMMERCE Voluntary guidelines supporting age diversity in Commerce

In March 2002, UNI Europa Commerce and Eurocommerce signed a document entitled "Voluntary Guidelines supporting age diversity in the commerce sector" in response to the Employment guidelines, which invited the social partners to develop a policy for active ageing, the social partners for Commerce, EuroCommerce and Uni-Europa, have decided to promote and recommend best practice concerning mature workers.

Long-term demographic trends, particularly falling birth rates, means that the workforce is ageing across the EU. This will have major implications for economic growth and social expenditure. In response to these trends, the need to adapt employment policies and practices to the ageing workforce has become a major concern of the EU institutions and Member States ¹.

At present, the EU still needs to increase its employment rate, both for social and for economic reasons. Employment remains the best strategy against social exclusion, especially in response to the latest economic crisis. With this objective in mind, and as demographic trends still follow the same underlying patterns, it remains vital to increase the employment rate of older workers with a view to deal with the shortage of labor. For the Commission, and for social partners, active aging remains a priority area for action.

Commerce employs a large number of ageing workers, often with a long work history in this sector. Their professional experience constitutes an asset, which should not be neglected. Sharing experience between generations adds value to the quality of work and to job satisfaction and will support knowledge transfer and the preservation of the corporate culture and values.. Structural and technological change is particularly important in commerce, which must react rapidly to changing consumer demands, as well as to both internal and external competition. Major business benefits may also be derived, by reflecting the customer base and understanding customer needs. Workers on their side expect good working conditions along their working life. So, it is particularly important for companies and for the social partners to consider how these changes will impact upon all staff

Therefore, UNI Europa Commerce and EuroCommerce believe that appropriate strategies are needed to maintain the flow of labor supply and secure employability of all workers, especially at a time when the unemployment crisis became a problematic issue in many countries.

In a working life where structural and technological changes are increasingly common, older workers may need special consideration and support which helps them with dealing successfully with their situation. Working with new technology and particularly in knowledge-related functions, the ways of older people to approach their tasks may differ from those of their younger colleagues. Accepting age diversity in working life also means to accept the related diversity in ways of solving problems and approaching tasks.

From an employment point of view, policies and measures concerning ageing workers must take into account different time perspectives, bearing in mind changes in their life and any difficulties that may be associated with social security. Job opportunities for young people can be created, by

¹ EC 1999 communication "Towards a Europe for all ages – promoting prosperity and intergenerational solidarity"; The 1999, 2000 and 2001 Employment guidelines invited Members states and Social partners to develop a policy for active ageing, encompassing life-long learning and flexible working arrangements; Article 13 of the Amsterdam treaty forbids discrimination on the ground of age; Council's Directive establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation.

making it possible for ageing workers to retire earlier. However in the longer term a declining population, as has been predicted, may cause labour shortages and there may be a need to promote the possibilities for ageing workers to remain in active working life. Labour shortages mainly concern highly skilled employees. It would also be adequate to implement succession plans to prevent these shortages by identifying relevant skills for the future..

There is not a conflict between these approaches and suitable incentives can help to attain the policy objectives. However, attention should be paid not to jeopardise job creation opportunities for younger people, when promoting incentive measures aimed at maintaining or reintegrating older people in or into the labour market.

EuroCommerce and Uni-Europa Commerce agree that there needs to be a focus by governments, social partners and enterprises on the age aspects of human resources management. Governments must ensure that appropriate legal frameworks are in place to assist the social partners and enterprises in developing flexible and appropriate working time arrangements, which are adapted to supporting age diversity and to responding to the perhaps different needs of various age groups and individuals. As European social partners for commerce, EuroCommerce and Uni-Europa Commerce, for their part, are committed to developing a European framework for working life and labour relations in their industry through a voluntary social dialogue, through concluding European Framework Agreements and through issuing Guidelines. In approaching this task, they will give full consideration to age diversity.

In order to promote a dynamic commerce industry, where flexible enterprises provide secure employment under good conditions to qualified workers, EuroCommerce and Uni-Europa agree that the following guidelines are recommended for the benefit both of enterprises and employees when approaching the age aspects of human resources management.

1. For the purpose of these guidelines, 'ageing' or 'mature' workers are workers who are defined as such in legislation, agreements or codes of practice, where they exist on European or national levels.
2. The participation and commitment of social partners at all appropriate levels (European, national and company) are key to define and implement comprehensive strategies on active ageing, through social dialogue and collective bargaining.
3. It is crucial that social partners in the commerce sector work together to enable a change of mentality in approaching age diversity, so that intergenerational solidarity is seen as an added value by workers and companies alike.
4. According to national law where that exists and European law, ageing workers shall not be subject to discrimination at the workplace. An age-neutral approach should be adopted as regards employment relations. Recruitment, vocational training and the distribution of positions within the enterprise should depend on skills and abilities, regardless of the age of the person concerned. The main criteria for development process should only take into account the best adapted skills for the job, independently from the age in order to fight discrimination.
5. Social partners have a special role to play in abolishing age stereotypes at the workplace. In particular, as the demand for digital skills increases, they should work together and put in place re-training measures as necessary for all employees.
6. Employers and their older employees should jointly consider any mutually beneficial options whereby they might remain longer in active working life or retire earlier. This may be achieved through flexible retirement schemes during the last active years, during which the needs of individual workers, enterprises and societies can be reconciled.
7. In many cases, modern technologies and ergonomics can improve productivity, while promoting quality of work and mitigating potential physical problems caused by age. Therefore, whenever possible age should be taken in consideration when designing the job and the organization of the work, adapting them to the different phases of a working life. Cooperation with the European Agency for occupational Health and Safety in the framework of their forthcoming campaign on "Healthy workplaces for all ages" can be a good way forward. Support of technologies could also help preserving the physical condition of employees and allow them to have longer careers.
8. The social partners have a special role to play in finding new forms of work and training, to facilitate the continuous integration of ageing workers. Incentives should encourage workers of all ages to take up learning and training opportunities. It is important for older workers to have equal access to training opportunities and should benefit as far as possible from programmes, courses and seminars, taking into account their initial skills and capacities, especially in regard to the introduction of new technologies or work processes.
9. It is therefore essential that training and retraining initiatives are implemented in order to support all workers in contributing to their improvement of their working conditions
10. Social partners underline their mutual responsibility to improve or maintain good health conditions for ageing employees. The employer has the responsibility to provide the means according to law or collective agreements for the occupational health care of its workers, while

the individual employee, should use those means made available to keep in good health conditions. Most people working in retail /wholesale store, perform tasks which involve physical strain, however ageing employees should also invest in keeping their mental fitness.

11. Easily adaptable mutually agreed schemes should, where relevant, pay attention to the specific requirements of older workers. Working time, for example, could be adjusted in accordance with existing legal provisions where this is mutually beneficial to meet the changing needs/capacities of workers. Voluntary part time work and voluntary flexible work scheduling can be encouraged, to allow ageing workers to retain their health and to continue their active participation in working life until retirement. Potential negative effects of such arrangements on the future pension of the worker should be considered. Measures to reconcile work and family life should be specifically valued.
12. EuroCommerce and UNI Europa believe that the key to put in place effective policies, that benefit both workers and companies, is through a suitable and sustainable work organization consistent with the management of age diversity at all stages of a professional career.

Bearing in mind the need to avoid any new kind of discrimination at the workplace, EuroCommerce and Uni-Europa are committed to improving the employment and employability of all workers, and in this way are helping to support European Union policies in this area. They will continue to explore measures aimed at giving ageing workers the possibility to remain in active working life. For this reason, it is important to have inclusive companies able to attract and retain people from different generations and lifestyle (younger, older, married, single parents, etc.)

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