

AGE MANAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

Recommendations for Employers

The ageing of workforce is a challenge which affects both individual organisations and the economy as a whole. The partners of the EU-funded “Best Agers Lighthouses” project have screened scientific and practical responses to this challenge, all of which are related to the concept of age management – i.e. the creation of working conditions which make it possible for every individual to be productive throughout and up until the end of their career path. Several of these tools and strategies were tested in the course of organisational interventions carried out in nine public and private organisations from the Baltic Sea Region.

Such concrete measures cannot be prescribed but must be carried out by and in the organisations themselves. Scientific studies have shown that age management is not only beneficial to the individual employee, but also sound business practice that helps organisations to sustain their productivity and competitiveness despite the demographic challenge. The organisational interventions carried out in the “Best Agers Lighthouses” project may serve as good examples, and the following recommendations are based upon the experience gathered in the course of the project:

ANALYSE YOUR ORGANISATION'S SITUATION

Carry out age and competence mapping exercises in your organisation to understand your staff situation now and in the future!

It all begins with analysing your current situation: How old are your employees? Which departments or professions are particularly affected by ageing? Which are key positions where the loss of competence of experienced employees would hurt most? There are many tools which have been developed for this purpose. Make use of them!

Consider looking for external help!

Age management requires a long-term perspective and long-term commitment. Planning and implementing it requires time. Unless your company has a strong HR department, you might want to think about seeking external help. Consult your local intermediary organisation (chamber of commerce, industry association) to find a suitable expert.

Consult your employees!

Your employees are experts on their own behalf. If you ask them about their needs and wishes, they can help you design measures that have an immediate effect on their satisfaction at the workplace and, hence, their motivation. But consider carefully how you approach them. Raising personal and sensitive issues requires trust and openness. A respected colleague who has no or little personal interest in the matter could serve as an intermediary between employees and organisational leadership.

MAKE YOUR OWN AGE MANAGEMENT ROADMAP

Use good practices from elsewhere as inspiration, but find your own way!

If you look around, you will find examples of companies and public organisations which have implemented age management measures successfully. Let these examples inspire you, but do not try to copy them. Every work environment has its own specifics, and you should find solutions that fit yours!

Don't try to do everything at once – take one step at a time!

Introducing age management measures means changing the work environment which you, the organisational leadership and the employees have got used to. Changing it needs time, patience and mutual trust. Begin with small measures that have an immediate effect. This will generate acceptance and motivate you and your employees to take the next step.

Walk the talk!

While engaging in a discussion with your employees and managers is a first – and very important – step to creating a work environment that suits all age groups, you should by no means stop there. Show your willingness to make changes, even if you are not totally sure about the outcome, or else you risk losing your employees' trust.

CREATE A MORE FLEXIBLE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Provide good health care, prevention measures and an ergonomic work environment

Health is a crucial dimension of the employees' ability to work and different jobs exert different strains on the human body. While the risk for becoming physically unable to work is usually higher in blue-collar professions, psychological strains such as hectic schedules or the inability to influence one's own work affect all employees' mental health. Proactive approaches to work-related health promotion include a safe, hazard-free work environment, physically and cognitively ergonomic work solutions and a supportive psychosocial work organisation. Occupational health services and occupational safety officers are important partners in creating a healthy work environment. Remember: preventing employees' health problems is easier and cheaper than dealing with their consequences.

Redefine and adjust workload and work processes!

Workloads need to be adjusted to the employees' work ability. Excessive workloads and the inability to influence and adapt work processes will push experienced employees to early exit from employment. You can make physically demanding tasks easier to cope with by involving the employee in decisions about task performance and timing and by providing proper equipment. Moreover, consider giving experienced employees new, less physically straining tasks, such as sharing their know-how with younger employees as mentors. This allows them to play to their strengths and increases the meaningfulness of their work.

Allow for your employees to have more control over their work (time) arrangements!

Employers will be facing increasing demands for more flexible work arrangements. Young generations value leisure time and possibilities to work when and wherever it suits their personal situation. Mid-career employees are sandwiched between caring for their children and their elderly parents, often simultaneously. Experienced employees with caregiving duties require flexible work arrangements, such as flextime and telework. By providing good work-life balance opportunities you can enhance current productivity and secure future recruitment by being known as an attractive employer.

Create age-mixed teams and employ mentoring practices!

Studies have shown that age-mixed teams are more productive in challenging decision-making tasks than homogenous teams. Letting younger, middle-aged and older employees work on a project together allows all of

them to bring in their own competences and perspectives. In addition, such teams allow experienced employees to pass on their know-how to inexperienced ones within the work context. Start to think about the transfer of tacit knowledge well before an older employee is about to retire.

CAREFULLY CHANGE THE COMPANY CULTURE

Challenge stereotypes about age!

According to common stereotypes, older workers are less motivated, less willing and able to learn and reluctant to change. These negative images of ageing exist at all levels – among executives, middle management, and the employees themselves. There is, however, no empirical evidence for such shortcomings of older workers. Contemplate your own experiences of growing older and maturing and reflect upon your perceptions of ageing employees. Think about offering seminars or trainings about ageing for your managers. And most importantly: Try to lead by example and practice what you preach!

Show your appreciation!

Few things affect an employee's productivity more than the sense of being able to make a meaningful contribution. Let your employees know that you value their work and that you care for their satisfaction. The need for regular performance appraisals should be self-evident, but consider introducing additional conversations that focus on long-term career development and sustained work ability.

Raise the participation rate of older employees in qualification and education – promote lifelong learning!

Giving older employees continued access to further education and on-the-job training is not merely a gesture of



appreciation, but sound HR practice. Employees who feel they can sustain or improve their qualification level or even engage in new fields of work keep their motivation and remain productive. Enhancing their mentoring skills will provide you with twice the benefit, as also younger employees can profit as well.

Focus on job competences and personal capabilities when hiring new people, not on age!

Age discrimination is a very common practice in the labour market. While employers often value the know-how and experience of their long-term staff members, they are hesitant to hire older applicants. Think about what skills you are looking for when designing a job profile and advertising a position. If you put emphasis on empathy, the capability to think strategically and communication skills, older applicants might just be the right choice for you.

COMMUNICATE WHAT YOU ARE DOING

Keep your employees informed about what's going on!

For years, early retirement has been a very common practice for companies and public organisations alike. Therefore, ageing employees might still be suspicious if they notice that the management is working on special measures for their age group. Let all employees know that the purpose of your activities is not to get rid of older employees, but to retain them and their expertise in the organisation and to enable them to continue working to their full potential.

Share your success with other employers!

There are very few employers who have never pondered about the consequences of demographic change for their organisation. Yet good examples of age management measures are sometimes hard to find, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises. If age management has worked for your organisation, then share your enthusiasm with other executives! There is nothing more convincing than success stories told by those who experienced them.

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MAKE THE CHANGES LAST

Understand age management as a permanent process which needs to be evaluated and updated!

Even if you have planned your age management measures well, monitoring their results and adapting them as needed is mandatory. Keep in mind that you will see little effects if you do not ensure that newly introduced approaches become permanent company practice. A one-time workshop or training course is not enough – over time your efforts should evolve into an integrated, pro-active strategy that takes into account interdependencies between different fields of intervention.

Assess the costs and benefits of the implemented age management measures!

While not all benefits of age management are easily measurable (e.g. employer's attractiveness for job applicants, increased motivation of employees), easy calculations are sometimes sufficient to demonstrate the cost effectiveness of age management measures. Compare the costs for keeping an older employee a few years longer with the costs for recruiting a new one. You might be surprised about the outcome.

Integrate age management into your organisation's long-term HR strategy!

Remember that age management is not just targeted support for older employees, but the creation of a work environment that embraces the contributions of employees of all ages, at all stages of their careers. In the end, many things like diversity management, age management are nothing else but sound HR management practice that takes into account specific abilities and preferences of all employees and enables the organisation to achieve its aims now *and* in the future.



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