

**Peer Learning Event on****Guidance in employers' age management strategies, Thessaloniki 10/12/2012****Venue: Makedonia Palace Hotel****CONCLUSIONS**

On the 10th of December 2012, Cedefop organised the peer learning event, "Guidance in employers' age management strategies". This event had as a main purpose debating the first interim findings of the Cedefop study with the same name.

The study aims at investigating:

- (i) how European and national policies and strategies address the issue of staying longer in employment;
- (ii) how lifelong guidance is embedded in employers' age management strategies supporting older workers' (55+) lifelong learning and skills development; and
- (iii) to what extent different forms of guidance support are available to this target group.

This paper synthesises the key messages resulting from the presentations and discussions held at this meeting which will assist the next research stages of the study.

Departure points for the peer learning event

Europe faces a demographic scenario of ageing population that is challenging to firms, social security systems and to working individuals in general. There is a shortage in the supply of labour coupled with a strong pressure over social security systems, due to the sharp change in the proportion of employed active population relative to the retired workforce.

To respond to this situation, many national governments and employers have made an investment in strategies that ease the extension of citizens' working lives, through legislative and administrative decisions (in the case governments), or human resource organisation (in the case of employers).

Both at national and firm level, guidance can play an important role in supporting the transitions that workers face in the maturity phase of their careers, generating value for firms, career stability and security for older workers and also societal level results. Guidance in age management strategies can benefit firms by enhancing the potential of their employees' experience in pursuing better results for the enterprise, by assessing their skills, clarifying possible learning paths which may complement existing skills, making redeployment of workers easier, enabling knowledge transmission between generations of workers. On the other hand, guidance can help older workers seize new career opportunities, clarify training needs, validate skills acquired non-formally/informally, facilitate internal redeployment, ease retirement, search for new jobs in mature career stages. The benefits to workers are particularly enabled by the development of career



management skills, which increase the autonomy of individuals in dynamically adapting to new situations in their career.

At EU-level, the 2008 Council Resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies and the Bruges Communiqué attribute an important role for lifelong guidance in the development of active age management. These documents stress that quality guidance services must aim at the lifelong development of career management skills, at the increase in access to guidance for all age groups and at clarifying training and skill validation options for older workers.

Key Messages from the event

The discussion held suggests interesting routes to further the ongoing research and address a number of critical issues within Cedefop's study:

Driving principles and organisation

The role of users

- A fundamental tension exists between two possible approaches to age management in organisations: an instrumental vision of workers based on maximising the contribution of the human factor to firms' results, and the holistic lifelong guidance vision which is based on the principle of user centrality, i.e. the need to understand and depart from people's individual realities. While the first vision acknowledges the utility of typical guidance-related methods and activities, it does not necessarily attribute a central role to user participation, personal motivation and welfare. Guidance services should help older workers to respond to challenges which have a high degree of individual specificity, such as overcoming lacks of self-confidence, learning barriers, coping with change in work and personal life, finding personally-adjusted training opportunities. Activities which miss the specificity of the users' experiences and needs can have very low effects due to low motivation and lack of personal relevance. Without user-centred approach, it is not possible to ensure individual engagement and the effectiveness of the approach for both workers and firms. **Q: Does the guidance enterprises provide enable users to explore development opportunities that serve their needs and purposes? How can enterprises integrate the principle of user centrality in their age management practices?**
- Most of the problems and challenges that workers face in a mature stage of their careers, such as skills' obsolescence, physical problems, low motivation due to inadequate matching, have been building up since the early stages in their careers. From an individual and organisational standpoint it is advantageous that guidance is available all through the life cycle of the workers, to support their career development in an integrated manner, that is simultaneously preventive and constantly motivating for individual development. **Q: How can a life cycle approach to guidance be integrated in the age management practices of organisations?**



Guidance and management

- While the way in which guidance related activities are integrated in age management practices is an open field for debate, it is obvious that these practices can help organisations achieve better results. Guidance can help assure better transmission of knowledge between older and newer workers, ensure stability of internal processes, support innovation activities (product and process) and help fit people to jobs/jobs to people. **Q: How can guidance activities support the improvement of organisational procedures/activities?**
- Frequently firms establish apprenticeships, knowledge management systems or shop floor dispositions that rely strongly on the assumption that older workers are willing to act as mentors and coaches. However, older workers may not want to /feel confident to act as mentors, or may feel discouraged to accept reassignments that apparently stigmatise them as less capable than their younger colleagues, coining them as unproductive and useless. Management decisions which are based on such assumptions and neglect perceptions, aspirations and attitudes of older workers, bear the risk of failure. **Q: How can individuals' perceptions, attitudes and aspirations be taken into account, to assure participation of older workers in management initiatives?**
- The relevance of guidance activities is sustained by a response to individuals' needs that may allow for adjusted learning activities or changes in work conditions/contents, that help the person be more motivated and better equipped to develop his/her activities. Adequate assessment of skills, attitudes and preferences, as well as the development of a cooperative relationship between guidance practitioner/counsellor and user are fundamental. This trust-based relationship will only exist if the objectives of the activities developed are transparent for both users and organisation and participation in guidance processes is not coercive. **Q: Are guidance services provided in organisations transparent, non-coercive and respectful towards the rights of users?**
- Guidance activities in organisations normally involve a number of participants: employers, guidance professionals, line managers and users. It is not clear which part is played by each of these actors in guidance activities, what their level of accountability is and, fundamentally, which specific skills each of them need to have so that the quality of guidance is assured. **Q: Which role do the professionals involved in guidance activities play and what skills should they possess to effectively carry them out?**



Stakeholder cooperation and policy level concerns

Financing and stimulating guidance for older workers

- Both employers' representatives and trade unions can play a fundamental role in promoting age management strategies, supported by quality guidance. Employer representatives and unions can, for example, help firms create learning opportunities for employees, on and off-the-job by supporting the identification of individual skills needs and aspirations. Career pathways are necessarily very diverse, and tools must be put into place to allow for customisation of careers. Collective agreements should ensure legal rights for all employees, but can be completed/refined with agreements on the sector and firm level. Mechanisms should be found to ensure also that the employees take responsibility for their own lifelong learning and career pathways. **Q: What mechanisms can be found by social partners to support both workers and firms in enabling mutually beneficial and individually customisable paths?**
- The willingness of firms and managers to take an active role in guidance activities for their older workers seems to be closely related with perceiving the benefits of doing so. Selective incentives of financial (e.g. benefit/tax incentives to firms, annual prizes to managers) or non-financial nature (e.g. "good practice" national distinction) aimed at firms and managers can play an important role in establishing guidance-supported career development activities. **Q: What kind of incentives can be implemented for organisations and managers, to stimulate good practices in guidance for older workers?**
- The structure and organisation of guidance activities is closely related to their final cost. While larger organisations can more easily establish a rationale for the inclusion of guidance activities in their HR management, with resource to external professionals, or by hiring staff with specific skills in guidance, small and medium firms, as well as third sector entities might not have the possibility to do so. Providing targeted training to managers and cooperating with public employment services and other guidance providers (e.g. association, private, providers, trade unions) is a possibility to assure access of SME' workers to guidance. **Q: How can guidance be made affordable for SME's and other entities with limited financial resources?**
- Regular, publicly-funded guidance providers (e.g. PES, VET entities) can implement outreach activities to support the development of community-based services to increase labour market integration and learning activities of older individuals. Workers associations/networks, local organisations, third-age organisations, for example can benefit from such activities aimed at capacity building in guidance areas. Further, the cooperation of PES and trade unions with third sector organisations can help identify needs and offer services to groups of older workers who face specific challenges (e.g. migrant workers, female workers returning to work). **Q: How can outreach services support older workers' career development?**



Quality assurance

- Companies' guidance initiatives for their older workers are normally very weakly (if at all) linked to national active ageing and lifelong guidance frameworks. A stronger concern of national/regional authorities with organisational practices, as well as a stronger cooperation between stakeholders via national guidance forums can raise the general quality and social outcomes of the services provided. **Q: How can company initiatives and national frameworks and systems for guidance and age management be better linked to each other?**
- Given the low linkage between national frameworks and organisational initiatives, it is not clear how the quality of the provided services is assured in terms of practitioners' skills, use of adequate methods, outcomes for individuals and organisations. A greater concern of national authorities with assisting firms in the provision of these services, as well as stronger cooperation among involved stakeholders in national forums to adopt and harmonise quality criteria could prove useful. **Q: How can the quality of company-based guidance activities be assured?**