

Policy Document 5:

Age Management 2

Ergonomic Aspects and Health Interventions for Older Workers

Description of the Issue

Globally, the population is ageing, which has serious consequences for businesses. The prosperity of companies is crucially dependent on their ability to efficiently manage their employees, including older workers. Good practice in age management is defined as those measures that combat age barriers and/or promote age diversity. These measures may entail specific initiatives aimed at particular dimensions of age management; they may also include more general employment or HR policies that help to create an environment for all in without being disadvantaged by their age (Walker, 1999).

Companies now need to encourage longer working lives and to ensure that work remains a positive experience for workers throughout their career trajectories, and does not damage their health. The major contemporary challenges to health at work are those associated with the way work, and work organisations are designed and managed. This is especially true for older workers.

This policy brief focuses on promising practices in age management regarding ergonomic aspects and health interventions for older workers at an organisational level and can serve as an inspiration for, among others, companies and policymakers. This policy brief covers 8 countries (Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, The Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom) to give a glimpse of the current situation of promising practice in age management. The widespread adoption of good practice in age management will help organisations to:

- Adjust to the inevitable ageing of their workforces; enhance the competitiveness and productivity of their ageing workforces and improve the employability of people.
- Assist in prolonging working life; and ensure more equal opportunities for workers of different ages.

Promising Practices

Older workers' experience in a company is invaluable and cannot be acquired quickly. Organisations need to accommodate the needs of their ageing employees, considering physical and psychological aspects of work. Examples of promising practice include the following:

- **Ergonomic aspects:** In companies such as Rowenta Werke (Germany), new workstations can be simulated, tried out and rated beforehand by the employees at test workstations. Ergonomic experts may reject specific ergonomic aspects during the planning and construction phases.
- **Ergonomic design:** The company Revoz d.d. (Slovenia) manufactures cars. Its health and safety policies include the ergonomic design of the workplace. Even though this does not address age, directly, it helps ageing employees

on a daily basis. Employees are also encouraged to make suggestions on ergonomics. Better education and training is implemented and occupational mobility provided.

- **Ergonomic services:** Rapid Granulator AB (Sweden) has introduced keep-fit programmes and links with a local occupational health group. It also offers ergonomic services, where a physiotherapist inspects each workstation and recommends design improvements. Success is evident in the company's relatively low rate of sickness absence and higher levels of productivity.
- **Annual health check:** The company Pikolin (Spain) has its own medical team and its own risk prevention office. An annual health check is obligatory for the entire workforce. Employees in positions with a higher risk factor, are monitored

more frequently. Based on this assessment, the company improves ergonomics by adjusting the workplace to the physical condition of employees and also encourages the redeployment of workers to new jobs to eliminate particular work risks to the employee's health.

- **Workplace:** A project introduced by the company Lohmann and Rauscher (Czech Republic) involves better healthcare possibilities for employees and places emphasis on creating a high quality, healthy and stress minimising workplace. The study proposed necessary measures to improve working conditions. Moreover, medical professionals check every six months whether the measures have been adhered to.
- **Job design:** Hazenberg Bouw BV (The Netherlands) developed a job design to match the physical capabilities of older workers: e.g. older workers were assigned tasks such as foreman responsibilities, tutoring of younger workers (knowledge transfer), and slower-paced tasks, which were less physically demanding.
- **Physical work environment:** Work in the oil industry is physically demanding. A UK Oil

company offers workplace health assessments that aim to resolve common problems such as back pain. A doctor is also available on site to review employees' existing health problems and to intervene when serious health problems arise. The company offers annual medical examinations for employees aged 50 and over.

- **Psychological environment:** In Berner Oy (Finland) within the senior programme, a career plan is drawn up by all workers aged 55, with their supervisors. The career plan contains an assessment of to what extent their duties, working hours and working conditions need to change, in order to stay longer at work while taking on productive and stimulating work. Berner promotes cooperation and interaction between all generations. One tool of age management is senior management, whose purpose is to allow supervisors to take a favourable view of people ageing, ensure that tacit knowledge is passed on, and show respect for their experience, skills, competence, and commitment.

Policy Recommendations

In this brief, we have put together some examples of good practice, which have been applied in selected European countries. The selected practices have been applied in different conditions and which reveal different strategies of age management regarding ergonomic aspects and health interventions for older workers at an organisational level. Integrating or adapting these identified practices would lead to:

- Adapting the organisation of work to the health and age of workers.
- Integrating ergonomic changes to improve work posture.
- Enhancing workers' individual interest in maintaining their physical capacity.
- Improvement in both the physical and mental work capacity of workers of all ages.
- Reducing leave due to sickness and improving work satisfaction of older employees;
- Increasing investment in ergonomic resources at all sites;
- Integrating productivity criteria by ergonomists and HR managers, together with safety requirements;
- Improving the continuity and quality of social dialogue, mainly through committees on health and safety at work.

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