

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 21

Lifelong learning for older workers

Context of the Research

Demographic change will continue to drastically alter the structure of the workforce in coming decades across Europe. This will lead to a diminishing supply of labour, which could have an impact on productivity and competitiveness. A greater understanding is needed of how the labour market and the working lives of people will need to adapt to an “ageing workforce” that also has to cope with technological changes and an increasingly global economy.

During the 1990s the trend was for older workers to be excluded from the labour market. Increasingly there will be a need to reverse this trend in order to cope with these demographic changes. Education and training systems are going to need to adjust to these changes in order to ensure that all workers including older workers have the necessary competences to meet these new demands, perhaps, on their longer working lives - thus the growing importance of lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning in general, and demand for continuous development of skills, knowledge and attitudes needed in working life in particular, have resulted in a call for new ways to organise learning, in and outside the workplace. Parallel to that, there is a need to monitor, recognise and more effectively to put into action the existing knowledge in companies, and include all stakeholders in these processes. Furthermore, these developments have challenged, on one hand to re-evaluate the concept of job-related competence and ‘competent’ workers, and on the other the traditionally stereotypes-coloured attitudes toward learning and development, particularly in later phases of the life-span.

This project studied 27 small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in England, Finland and Norway. It looked at the learning of older (45+) workers and addressed the maintenance, development and utilisation of their job-related competences - knowledge, skills, learning, values, and attitudes. In particular the project focused on the individual and organisational effects, needs and opportunities emanating from the ageing of populations and changes in working life.

Key Conclusions

The following conclusions were reached: -

- 1. Older workers are competent workers.** Job competence is often qualitatively different between older and younger workers, due to the differences in their work histories and experiences and educational background, but not their age. Both groups manifest strengths and weaknesses in competence in comparison to each other.
 - The job competence of older workers was generally highly valued by managers and employees in SMEs.
 - Age as such was not a contributing factor to any competence deficiencies.
 - Although systematic monitoring or documenting of older workers' competence did not exist, experienced workers were acknowledged and often had a "mentoring" role in the SMEs.
 - Work experience and personal characteristics were valued as more important contributors to job-competence than formal training.
 - Social and occupational competence, as well as work morale were considered to improve with age.
- 2. Learning at work among older and younger workers alike is challenged by the changes in working life and workplace.** Continuous changes both stimulate learning and reduce opportunities for it. Age as such has little to do with effectiveness of learning at work. How learning from and at work is organized – also acknowledged, supported and rewarded - in the workplace is crucial to learning at work to flourish as individual and collective activity.
 - Changes in working life and workplaces do challenge the learning of older workers but workload and time pressures reduced their opportunities for learning. In some cases older workers adopted an adjusting rather than participating strategy amidst these changes.
 - The assessment of learning attitudes, skills, or motivation, showed no relationship to age except in regard to memory and speed.
 - Learning at work varied more across different work types and often within age groups (among younger *or* among older workers) across work types than age.
 - New technology was the biggest learning challenge to all employees. Some older workers managed well, whilst with others it resulted in their

departure. Practice-based learning was preferred, though in some cases the need for more general theoretical issues was brought up.

- Learning in the workplace was highly social and a collegially shared activity but rarely systematically focused upon or organised.

3. A fuller utilization of the job competence of older, highly experienced workers in the collective scenery of the workplace can enhance productivity and facilitate cooperative learning. However, its full recognition, putting into action and development poses as much of a challenge to management as many other areas of modern knowledge management.

- Older workers do participate in informal and non-formal training but compared to younger workers are less inclined to participate in formal training.
- Competence development of younger workers was more visible and systematic (e.g. mentoring), whereas older workers were viewed more as contributors and 'teachers' as opposed to being in need of learning and development, with the exception of information technology.

4. Development of learning organization requires capability, motivation and opportunities to reflect upon one's own and company's practices with management setting the bottom line.

- Awareness of SMEs as learning organisations and what that might mean in one's own company was relatively low among both management and employees. However, it was observed that a transition process may be taking place as an SME moves from a traditional, stable organisation towards a more dynamic, responsive learning organisation.
- The effects of our efforts to develop SMEs towards learning organizations by externally initiated, reflexive learning interventions were strongly dependent on management's involvement in and commitment to such a reflection.

5. Flexibility and productivity of the older workforce, as well as social cohesion are not given in any particular context. Rather they are produced and reproduced in and through policies we create and our everyday practices in working life. Strong will and concerted effort to develop these qualities are crucial, among management as well as among employees.

- Successful work-based learning and training interventions involving older workers have the potential to improve motivation for learning, self-confidence, organisational commitment, and the social climate in groups with mixed ages.

Key Recommendations

Specific recommendations for European and national policy: -

1. There is a need to raise awareness of the value of older workers in working life by highlighting the strengths in older workers' job competences. The national programmes and campaigns implemented in some European countries have provided excellent results and hence examples of good practice.
2. Educational initiatives should be developed that create and strengthen learning opportunities and support both older workers and genuine lifelong learning. European and national educational policies for lifelong learning must support provision for the upgrading of basic skills.
3. Continuing efforts are needed to reverse the lowering of retirement age and to improve the labour market position of older workers through initiatives such as "age-management" in companies.
4. More vigorous effort and more positive attitudes are needed towards the training of older workers.
5. The benefits of "inter-generational communication" and co-operation towards increasing productivity should be highlighted and incorporated into national policies. However, there is a need to be aware that this increases the risk and the expenditure for small business. National policies should aim to lower this expenditure or extend the horizons for return.
6. Greater attention must be paid to synergies between personal interests in work, leisure and training when developing policies to support flexible arrangements between work and retirement. For example, the personal interests of employees in late career could be used as a point for personal development and for updating work skills.

Specific recommendations for companies: -

7. Initiatives are needed to develop sensitivity and accreditation of workforce diversity in management policies and practise.
8. Management should develop an improved awareness of and clarity over the learning-working relationship in their companies and through open discussions work towards clearly articulated, inclusive, longer term learning and development policies, necessary also in small companies.
 - a. Inclusive developments are needed to ensure that older workers are given the chance to participate in organisational restructuring. The designing of work organisations and training systems should be sensitive to workforce diversity.

- b. New and flexible ways of organising working involving learning are needed to best utilise the competences of highly experienced workers.
- c. Management needs to respond to new forms of learning and utilise the diversity of their personnel, in order for SMEs to develop into learning organisations, especially in occupations and companies in traditional sectors.
9. More attention needs to be paid to the effects of training on workplace and actual job tasks, particularly among highly experienced employees. Participation in training should always be coupled with conscious concern for individual and collective competence development and advancement.
10. Human resource development policies and practices should be sensitive to and reflect the diversity of the workforce.
 - a. Increased awareness is needed of differences in learning styles and strategies.
 - b. Older workers with low or obsolete experience in participation in learning activities need support and encouragement to update their skills and personal development.
 - c. Inclusive support is vital for senior employees when learning new technologies, through methods and practises that will include and empower the current negative self-image of older workers and older learners.
 - d. Incentive systems are needed to motivate older workers into training and support learning and competence development.
 - e. Older workers must be encouraged to design their own personal careers through the combination of flexible practise and social/employment security.
11. A concerted effort is required to enhance knowledge and skills exchange and acknowledge “inter-generational communication” and cooperation.
12. Additional research is needed to improve learning environments in SMEs, including the development of methods to integrate older workers in learning organisations; the mapping of diversity in competences and flexible organisations; the identification of both new career patterns in late professional life and the age differences in the mastery of information and communication technology; the development of learning and teaching methods suitable for low-educated and older workers with emphasis on learning style and age differences.

Further Information

Full title of the study – “Working Life Changes and Training of Older Workers” (WORKTOW) with the final report completed in November 2001.

Final report published in 2002 and available at VOX, Trondheim, Norway. Phone +47 – 73 99 08 40, Fax. +47 – 73 99 08 50, E-mail: vox@vox.no.

[Full final report](#), [Abstract](#), [Summary](#), [Partner details](#)

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