

# COMBATING AGE BARRIERS IN EMPLOYMENT

RESEARCH SUMMARY



EUROPEAN FOUNDATION  
for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

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## Introduction

It is not an overstatement to say that the research summarised in this booklet concerns one of the most pressing issues confronting European societies: the impact of population ageing on employment and the labour market. European policy makers, employers and trade unions are increasingly having to come to terms with a new paradox concerning age and employment. On the one hand there is an increase in the average age of the economically active population in the EU. Over the next 10 years the age structure of the population of working age will change significantly: the numbers of young people (15-19) will decline by over 1 million (-5 per cent) and those aged 20-29 will fall by 9 million (-17 per cent), while the numbers of persons aged 50-59 will grow by 5.5 million (+12 per cent) and the 60-64 age group will grow by 1 million (European Commission, 1996). However, on the other hand, as a result of the continuous lowering of labour force exit thresholds and the operation of age discrimination in the labour market, people over 40 are regarded as nearing the end of their working lives.

This new and increasingly urgent paradox has to be addressed at both macro- and micro- levels (by policy makers and within organisations). Several European governments, including Austria, Finland, France and Germany, are currently reversing the public support they previously gave to early exit from the labour force

and are seeking ways of reducing the opportunities for and costs of early retirement (Delsen and Reday-Mulvey, 1996). Some employers are also reassessing their attitudes towards older workers, with some even constructing a positive 'business case' for employing this group. This 'business case' is built upon five points: the return on investment in human capital; the prevention of skill shortages; maximising recruitment potential; responding to demographic change; and promoting diversity in the workforce (Walker, 1995). Some trade unions too are reconsidering their support for early exit strategies.

In short there is an emerging case for combating age barriers in job recruitment and training on the grounds of pragmatism, commercialism, good human resource practice and in the interests of justice and fairness. However practical action in pursuit of these aims has been taken by only a minority of European employers and public authorities. Moreover there are differences among European countries in the extent to which age barriers are being tackled (Guillemard and Walker, 1994).

### ■ European Context

The issue of age barriers in employment and, in particular, the problem of discrimination against older workers, is now moving up the European policy agenda. When the European Observatory on Ageing and Older People was established, in 1990, it identified age and employment as one of the four key policy areas it would monitor (the others were incomes and living standards, health and social care, and social integration) (Walker, Guillemard and Alber, 1991, 1993). Consequently the 1993 European Year of Older People and Solidarity Between the Generations was partly focused on this issue, with publication of the first major report on age discrimination against older workers in the EC (Drury, 1993). In addition the Eurobarometer survey specially commissioned for the European Year revealed, for the first time, that a substantial majority of the general public in all of the then twelve Member States believed that older workers are discriminated against in job recruitment, promotion and training (Walker, 1993, p.26). At the end of the European Year older workers were confirmed in documents from both the Commission and the Parliament as a

priority area for the planned second programme of actions for older people.

In mid-1993 the Commission produced the White Paper, **Growth, Competitiveness and Employment** which was approved by the Heads of State as a basis for future EU action. The White Paper set the important strategic goals of a more flexible workforce and more flexible employment practices in order to meet the challenges of global competition. It provided the first public EU recognition of the implications of the ageing workforce, although it did not propose specific actions for older workers. The 1994 White Paper **European Social Policy: a way forward for the Union** did not specifically mention older workers but referred to the economic need for older people to make an active contribution to society. During the last year of the Delors Presidency there was also a **Declaration of Businesses Against Exclusion** which highlighted areas in which companies can develop policies to prevent exclusion and engender greater social cohesion. These initiatives included contributing to the social cohesion of deprived areas and marginalised groups, and promoting integration in the labour market; and older workers have been identified as a target group (Griffiths, 1996).

At the December 1994 European Council meeting in Essen, the Heads of State and Government confirmed the fight against unemployment as a paramount task of the European Union and as the central objective of economic policy. **The European Council Declaration** highlighted five key areas for action to improve employment, the fifth of which, improving measures to help groups which are particularly hard hit by unemployment, stated that ‘special attention should be paid to the difficult situation of unemployed women and older employees.’ The French Presidency of the European Council, in June 1995, saw the first political declaration at EU level of the need for special actions in this field. **The Resolution on the Employment of Older Workers** emphasised two key principles:

- the need to redouble efforts to adapt professional training and conditions of work to older workers’ needs;

- measures should be taken to prevent the exclusion of older workers from the labour market and older workers should have sufficient financial resources.

The Resolution proposed specific actions to be taken by national governments and/or the social partners including raising awareness among employers of the consequences of making older workers redundant, promoting the reintegration of older unemployed workers and eliminating possible legislative barriers to the employment of older workers although these are not binding on the Member States. The Resolution also called on the European Commission to promote the exchange of information and good practice concerning the employment of older workers across the EU (for further information on EU actions on older workers see Drury, 1995). (Looking further afield the G7 Social Summit in Lille on April 2, 1996 called for measures to put an end to the 'waste of human resources' following the acceleration of early exit from employment in ageing societies.) The priority given to older workers in the June 1995 Resolution has not been reaffirmed by subsequent Heads of State summits, which have emphasised long term unemployment and youth unemployment.

### ■ Age Barriers Project

In this context of changes in, and emphasis upon, employment policy within the EU the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions launched, in April 1994, a European project on Combating Age Barriers in Job Recruitment and Training. The project was focused on initiatives in favour of the retention, reintegration and retraining of older workers and involved seven Member States: Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. In addition some limited material was collected from two new Member States, Finland and Sweden (the research teams are listed in Appendix 1). The principal objectives of the project were:

- to collect information about good practice initiatives designed to combat age barriers in recruitment and training in the different Member States;





- to examine the perspectives of the social partners, with particular attention to proposals for removing age barriers;
- to document and assess a small number of initiatives - including both workplace and non-workplace initiatives as well as covering the public and private sectors - in order to highlight the lessons to be learned from the implementation of good practice with regard to older workers.

Each research team prepared a national report comprising four elements: a review of ageing and employment issues in their own country; an outline of the perspectives of the social partners, based on a workshop organised by the team; a portfolio of around 20 initiatives demonstrating good practice in age management; and 2-3 in-depth case studies of organisations in the portfolio. Despite the constraints on the research project, set mainly by resources and time, the national research teams were able to seek out a wide range of initiatives and to include some detailed case studies.

As well as this summary two major project reports are being published by the European Foundation. The main one **Combating Age Barriers in Employment - A European Research Report** synthesises the material collected by the national research teams. The report's five chapters summarise the key labour market issues in the nine Member States (including Finland and Sweden); describe the various dimensions of good practice reported by the national experts; use the in-depth case studies to emphasise the main lessons to be learned from the implementation of good practice; and summarise the main findings and make recommendations for action, by all of the parties involved, to combat age barriers. In addition to the main report, the Foundation is publishing a **European Portfolio of Good Practice in Combating Age Barriers**, which contains brief details of the wide range of initiatives found in the nine countries. From the outset the project has been aimed at influencing policy and practice, particularly among the social partners and, therefore, the publications take a very practical form.



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# 1

## Good practice in age management

This is the first European research to concentrate on good practice in the recruitment and training of ageing workers. But what is 'good practice'? It is most usefully defined with respect to specific policies and in this research we used the five main dimensions of age management in organisations to categorise aspects of good practice:

- job recruitment and exit;
- training, development and promotion;
- flexible working practice;
- ergonomics and job design;
- changing attitudes towards ageing workers  
(Casey, Metcalf and Lakey, 1993).

In general terms, we might say that good practice in the employment of older workers consists of combating age barriers, whether directly or indirectly, and providing an environment in which each individual is able to achieve his or her potential without being disadvantaged by their age. In order to achieve this goal policies do not necessarily have to be labelled 'older worker' policies - there may be general human resource (HR) strategies that are of particular benefit to mature employees. For example a system of annualised hours has proved to be particularly helpful to ageing workers with caring responsibilities but it is not intended

as an older worker-specific HR strategy. Inevitably the selection of examples of good practice entails a value judgement that a particular initiative is reducing age barriers in employment and that this is a desirable outcome. The dilemmas associated with this sort of judgement and the assessment of good practice are discussed in the main report (Walker, 1997).

### ■ Good Practice in Combating Age Barriers

The main theme of the research is combating age barriers in job recruitment and training, but the national research teams collected examples of good practice in all five areas of age management. In all 159 examples were made available in the national portfolios of good practice and, along with eight extra examples from Finland and Sweden, most of them have been presented in the European Portfolio of Good Practice. It is often the case that the boundaries between the different dimensions of good practice in age management are blurred. This is not surprising: organisations that have developed one element of good practice are unlikely to have done so in isolation from other aspects of HR management. Also it is frequently the case that to achieve good practice in recruitment or training a more wide ranging transformation in HR practice may be necessary or, alternatively, training itself may not be the main goal but merely a means to achieve aspects of good practice, such as changing attitudes or work processes.

The majority of the portfolio examples are located in relatively large, private, profit-making organisations. Initiatives focused on job recruitment for older workers are much less common than those concerned with flexible working practices and job training. Attempts to change organisational attitudes towards older workers are rare.

The UK examples focus mainly on job recruitment and flexible working practices. The Italian ones are all concerned with job recruitment and training. For Belgium and France the most common area of good practice in age management is flexible working practices. The Greek examples are mostly concerned with training, as are the German and Dutch ones.



## ■ Developing Good Practice

The most important goal of the research is to emphasise the important lessons that can be learned, in terms of transferring good practice initiatives to other organisations and countries, from the 22 detailed case studies carried out in Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK. These case studies form the centrepiece of this project and, despite the time constraints, represent substantial investigations on the part of the national researchers, which included site visits and interviews. The result is a very rich source of information concerning not just the nature of good practice initiatives but how they were developed and implemented and what has been their impact (see Appendix 2). Even in the main project report it is possible only to give a flavour of the detailed research carried out by the national teams.

Most of the case studies (14) are initiatives taken by private companies, three are in the public sector and the remaining five are non-profit making agencies. Most of the case studies are workplace-based (i.e. initiatives taking place within organisations directly responsible for employing the workers concerned). The size of the organisations studied varies widely, from 5 to 18,800 employees but, in fact, this dimension did not prove significant in determining the illustrative power of a particular case study. Some major European organisations are among the case studies, including some very modern 'high tech' companies and local authorities, indicating that good practice in age management is not confined to any industrial backwater.

What factors influence the decision of an organisation to develop good practice in combating age barriers? There are three main ones - two push and one pull factor - but the precise order of importance differs between organisations. First of all, there is the specific economic and labour market setting in which an organisation is operating. For example several initiatives were either developed in response to labour shortages or such shortages played an important role in determining their focus. Other initiatives were encouraged by labour surpluses. The shortage of qualified nursing staff is a familiar problem throughout Europe

and two of the initiatives - L'Incontro (Italy) and the Onze Lieve Vrouw Middelaars Hospital (Belgium) - were aimed directly at overcoming this deficiency by tapping into the pool of older nurses. In contrast the Employment Agency in Trento and the French insurance and chemicals companies introduced their good practice initiatives in response to labour surpluses.

Secondly there are changes in public policy, such as the closing-off of early exit subsidies or the provision of special training grants and support for job creation. For example, the change in public policy favouring partial rather than full early retirement influenced the French insurance and chemical companies in their decision to alter their exit policies. The Dutch Job Exchange programme for teachers resulted in large part from a change in government policy towards the education sector.

Of course government, central and local, may influence good practice in different ways: it may pay for its development; it may regulate to ensure it happens; it may exhort organisations to comply with it; or, as a direct employer, it may introduce good practice into its own machinery. Public sector subsidies were essential to ensure that several of the initiatives got off the ground - including the Dutch Job Exchange project, Stahlwerke Bremen and the POPE recruitment agency (UK). Three case studies involved local government and demonstrate the advantages of such semi-autonomous forms of administration. In particular the cases of GFAW (Germany) and the Trento Employment Agency illustrate the enormous potential for both job creation and the promotion of good practice in age management where there is devolved responsibility for employment and training.

As well as being a positive influence on the development of good practice the public sector may also act as an inhibitor. This negative aspect of the role of the public sector was illustrated in several initiatives - the main culprits being the social security and redundancy payments systems (Job Exchange, L'Incontro Coop) and the tax system (SISEMA).



The third source of impetus towards good practice is organisational culture. This refers to the HR tradition, current personnel policies and management style which, together, may support and encourage the development of good practice or, alternatively, favour the retention of age barriers. Because the case studies are examples of good practice they provide insights into the critical influence of organisational culture in one direction only. However, as indicated below, they also demonstrate how certain negative features of organisational culture may be overcome.

Some commercial organisations have long established traditions of consensual management and responsiveness to employees. Sometimes this approaches social partnership or what is fashionably called stakeholder capitalism, as in the case of the Wilkhahn furniture company, and sometimes it reflects a more paternalistic family-based tradition, as with TITAN and DELTA in Greece. Thus a cultural context favourable to good practice in age management may be created by either the craft traditions or the family orientation of a particular company. But it may also derive from very different and more urgent contemporary pressures, as in the case of Fontijne Holland, which has a pro-training culture because of its need to survive in the highly competitive machine manufacturing sector. Similarly with the UK company Glaxo R & D which regards the retention and retraining of older staff as a vital element in maintaining its competitive advantage.

## ■ Implementing Good Practice

If the examples of good practice are to be used to maximum advantage by the key actors in the labour market it is important to know how they were implemented and, in particular, what lessons may be passed on about the successes and pit-falls of that process.

As was noted above, in order to ensure the development of good practice in all quarters of the workplace, it may be necessary to embark on general action to change the organisational culture. The introduction of an 'age awareness' programme throughout an organisation is one, comprehensive, route to achieving cultural change and the one followed by the London Borough of

Hounslow. While most of the other workplace initiatives did not go that far, it is clear that careful planning and preparation was one of the main keys to successful implementation. Fontijne Holland provides an outstanding example of pro-active implementation - including consultation with and responsiveness to staff and targeted publicity material published in the company magazine. The company's approach to implementation is a model of good practice for others to follow.

Much of the research on age barriers in organisations highlights the potential blockage on the implementation of good practice created by the discriminatory actions of line managers. (These may derive from discriminatory beliefs and attitudes or perceived pressures to achieve specific business goals, or both.) This was one of the factors that prompted DSM (Netherlands) to introduce a comprehensive 'age aware' HR strategy. In fact DSM already had a very positive organisational culture but, nonetheless, age barriers can still survive in an enlightened HR environment and, in this case, they were being perpetuated by some line managers. The attitudes of some line managers were identified as having a similarly negative effect within Glaxo R & D. Another UK company, St Ivel, had experienced problems in the implementation of its policies to combat age barriers due to the stereotypical attitudes of local managers. In response the HR department insisted that managers should try out older workers in positions they assumed were unsuitable.

Regardless of how receptive an organisational culture may be to the implementation of good practice, problems can occur in the process itself. The initiatives developed by Stahlwerke Bremen and DSM both encountered such problems - initial difficulties in persuading older trainees to attend seminars and lack of experience in the implementation of age awareness strategies - and overcame them by, on the one hand, redoubling their efforts to persuade older workers to take part as trainers and, on the other, by gradual policy implementation and experimentation.

The implementation of policies to combat age barriers also creates dilemmas for trade unions. However, although concerns were





expressed by trade unions in the initial stages of several case studies, including L'Incontro and DSM, once the issues were explained to them their fears were allayed and they became supporters.

## ■ The Impact of Good Practice

Needless to say the most important outcomes of the 22 case studies are the actual achievement of one or more aspects of good practice and the practical demonstration of the value of employing and training older workers. This is not surprising at all because they were selected as exemplars of good practice in the countries concerned. In this respect many of the case studies are shining examples, beacons of light, for others to follow. They should make a huge contribution to dispelling the myths that older workers are not productive and that they are not interested in training. The fact that so many commercial companies have begun to combat age barriers is some proof of the existence of a business case for doing so.

There are many other positive outcomes from the initiatives as well as some negative ones. On the positive side, from the perspective of older employees, there is an improved sense of well-being resulting from feeling useful and productive and, in some cases, the economic and social benefits of reintegration in the labour market. On the negative front there is the experience by some participants of being second class citizens in comparison with those in the mainstream of the organisations.

Some of the outcomes are unintended spin-offs from the main purpose of the initiative, including some significant economic benefits. Improved morale and team working are associated with the Fontijne and Stahlwerke Bremen training initiatives and the two IBM case studies. Reductions in staff turnover have accompanied the L'Incontro Coop's recruitment project - a particularly important finding in view of the high staff turnover experienced by many health and social care agencies. A project linked to higher education institutions to transfer skills between generations has developed out of the Sernet initiative. Moreover, because of the good practice ethos that permeated the

development of this initiative IBM reports improved relations with its trade unions. Increased productivity and higher quality service to the public are unexpected benefits flowing from the SISEMA training initiative. The Trento environmental restoration and improvement agency calculates that it achieves a substantial saving (1 million lire) for every employee when compared with the cost of early retirement. Moreover the Trento initiative doubles as an example of good practice in job creation in the field of environment protection as well as in age management.

When it comes to the main lessons to be learned from the implementation of the case studies there are four main guidelines for those intending to introduce good practice into other organisations (assuming that the external stimuli exist for such action).

1. **Backing from senior management.** There is a wide variety of different reasons why management may support good practice in age management but, without it, an initiative is not likely to proceed very far. This much almost goes without saying but, in thinking about the transfer of good practice, it is important to bear in mind that, in several initiatives, it was necessary to campaign for this support. The role of the head of HR in the French chemicals company and in the UK cases of St Ivel, Glaxo and Hounslow proved decisive in championing the cause of good practice.

2. **A supportive human resource (HR) environment.** This does not necessarily have to be overtly older worker friendly in advance of the introduction of measures to combat age barriers. That was not the case, for example, with the three French companies but the value of training was recognised. All of the workplace case studies benefited from a supportive HR climate. In a few this included placing a high value on older workers (eg Stahlwerke Bremen,

Wilkhahn GmbH and Glaxo). Where this occurred the companies involved had sound business reasons for doing so. As the case studies show, a supportive HR environment may be created by both a traditional culture (such as the Greek informal social contract model) and a managerial style (as in France and the UK).

**3. Commitment from the ageing workers involved.** Although all but one of the workplace initiatives is the result of top-down policy decisions there is no doubt that the support of the older workers concerned was a vital element in the success of the case studies. This was not always forthcoming initially and several organisations have gone to considerable lengths to persuade older workers to accept and ‘own’ the initiative, such as the running of special seminars. In the case of training initiatives the most important factor in guaranteeing commitment is the principle that courses must be geared to their specific needs and employ methods, such as for learning, that they can engage with readily. In other words training courses should be developed in conjunction with ageing workers.

**4. Careful and flexible implementation.** If all of the other elements behind the development of good practice are secured then everything rests on the implementation process. The experience provided by the case studies shows that there are nine steps to be followed to guarantee successful implementation:

- careful preparation, including research in recruitment trends and age profiles of employees and labour market projections;
- open communication both with staff generally and with the target group about the objectives of the initiatives, including the use of seminars, workshops and newsletters;
- early involvement of trade unions, works councils and staff associations;
- the early involvement of older workers themselves to take part in the operation of the initiative, which greatly assists with the implementation process;
- education and consciousness raising among line managers;
- staged implementation, including a pilot phase both to test the initiative and to demonstrate to any doubters that it can be

effective (this can be carried out in a section of the organisation already predisposed to good practice in age management as a way of multiplying the impact of the experiment), regular monitoring and feedback with adjustments to the initiative if necessary;

- periodic assessment of impact and feedback once the implementation is complete;
- constant communication with all employees in order to avoid the development of ‘them and us’ attitudes,
- attention to other aspects of the working environment, such as arduous tasks and conditions, which may inhibit the example of good practice from achieving its intended effect.

In addition to these nine steps it is undoubtedly the case that the implementation of a specific good practice initiative will proceed most smoothly and be most effective if it is part of a broader HR strategy designed to combat age barriers, a point returned to below.

Some of these principles may be applied equally to both workplace and non-workplace initiatives, but the following are tailored specifically to the latter.

(i) **The need for financial support.** In the case of public sector organisations such as Trento and the Treuhand Agency of Thuringia finance may be guaranteed internally. But for non-governmental organisations, like Job Exchange and POPE, external funding is essential at least to pump-prime an initiative. NGOs must adhere to this principle but they are, therefore, subject to the uncertainties inevitably associated with both securing funding in the first place and keeping it for long enough to become established. With regard to winning the funding, a good scheme is not sufficient to guarantee success. It must also be addressed to an area of concern to policy makers in the public sector.

(ii) **Commitment of those targeted.** As with the workplace initiatives, the support of those at whom the project is aimed is a critical aspect of the achievement of good practice. This commitment is sometimes difficult to achieve in community-

based projects and will be influenced greatly by whether or not a positive outcome can be expected from participation. In the case studies the popularity of both the GFAW programme and the POPE agency is attributed largely to their successful record of job placement. However this may not be enough and, therefore, a subsidiary principle is to involve ageing workers themselves in the operation and marketing of the project.

(iii) **Careful and flexible implementation.** This process is as important for non-workplace initiatives as it is for their counterparts in the workplace. Many of the key steps outlined above may be applied here too. In particular good communication and the careful marketing and promotion of both the project and ageing workers to employers must be regarded as essential.

## ■ Transferring Good Practice

In selecting the case studies to be included in their national reports researchers were asked to be mindful of the need to use examples that also have wider European relevance. Not surprisingly therefore this proved to be the case. But none of those involved in the pre-planning of the project expected such rich and varied case studies. Moreover, the fact that several of them also have important potential to inform employment policy in the EU, is a bonus. The essential elements of each case study for replication in other countries are highlighted below. Where reference is made to the ‘high transfer potential’ of a particular initiative this means both that it would be easy to replicate elsewhere and that it would have a significant impact on combating age barriers.

### **IBM Skill Team (Belgium)**

#### **IBM Sernet (Italy)**

- extending the working lives of highly skilled older employees
- flexible employment
- intergenerational knowledge transfer

### **Onze Lieve Vrouw Middelaars Hospital (Belgium)**

#### **The Passantenhuis (Belgium)**

#### **L’Incontro Cooperative (Italy)**

- job creation for older workers, including low skilled
- strategically important health and social care sector



- reducing staff turnover and solving skill shortages
- improving quality of care
- high transfer potential

**London Borough of Hounslow (UK)**

**DSM Limburg BV (Netherlands)**

- comprehensive age awareness strategies to change organisational culture
- public and private sectors
- careful planning and implementation
- high transfer potential

**Wilkhahn GmbH (Germany)**

**Titan Group (Greece)**

**Delta Group (Greece)**

- older worker friendly cultures
- collective agreement on integration of older workers (Wilkhahn)
- training of older workers in new technology (Titan)
- flexible employment/sub-contracting
- training methods appropriate for older workers

**Furniture Company (France)**

- preferential recruitment of older workers

**Stahlwerke Bremen (Germany)**

**Fontijne Holland (Netherlands)**

- training initiatives for older workers
- high tech companies
- iron and steel industry (Stahlwerke) and specialised machinery manufacturer (Fontijne)
- continuous learning processes
- careful planning and implementation
- involvement of older workers in implementation
- high transfer potential

**Insurance Company (France)**

**Chemicals Company (France)**

- major companies in the services and manufacturing sectors

- replacement of full with phased early retirement
- retention of older staff

**St Ivel (UK)**

**Glaxo R & D (UK)**

- integrated age management strategies
- action on recruitment and training
- special programmes for women
- phased implementation
- high transfer potential

**SISEMA (Greece)**

- training in small business sector
- addressing needs of those with little formal education
- high transfer potential

**Province Trento (Italy)**

**GFAW (Germany)**

- job creation for older workers
- strategically important environment sector (Trento)
- involving older men and women
- using public sector funds to create employment on an agency basis
- assisting self-help groups (GFAW)
- use of older workers as facilitators
- high transfer potential

**Forum Wisselwerk (Netherlands)**

- improving staff morale in education sector

**POPE (UK)**

- active promotion of employment of older workers
- use of older people as trainers
- high transfer potential



This research has uncovered a range of successful and transferable initiatives that may be seen as a starting point for a new workplace policy towards age and employment. They deserve wide dissemination throughout Europe. All of them call for positive action to combat age barriers. But there are important caveats too, such as the danger of focusing policy and practice exclusively on older workers because this may stigmatise the group. In order to maintain a balanced labour market policy and avoid intergenerational conflict it is important not to excessively target initiatives on older workers. It has to be recognised also that some older workers do not want to return to work or stay in employment. The size of this group differs between countries depending on the significance of early exit policies and the relative generosity of social benefits (for example in France there is a dearth of older people wanting to resume work). Also, equally importantly, there are the dangers of a policy which forces older people to stay in employment, either directly through raising pension ages or indirectly through stigmatising early exit. These could put undue pressure on ageing employees, particularly those suffering from ill-health.

This research has shown also that good practice in combating age barriers can take a wide variety of different forms. Indeed both the case studies and the portfolio examples reflect a continuum of good practice ranging from very limited and narrowly focused

measures (such as the furniture company) to more comprehensive ones (such as DSM, Hounslow, St Ivel). Implicitly this analysis has suggested that it is possible for organisations to develop more comprehensive strategies and to build on even minimalist examples of good practice. Thus we might usefully conceive of good practice in age management as a dynamic process that should, ideally, be moving along the continuum towards an integrated age management strategy. In doing so, largely reactive good practice aimed at problem solving would be replaced by a holistic approach designed to prevent the occurrence of age discrimination, unemployment and age management problems.

What would this entail? Rather than focusing only on the latter part of an individual's working life an integrated policy would encompass the whole career. Thus, instead of a series of one-off or ad hoc measures, this perspective calls for a new holistic HR strategy on age and employment. Such a strategy would include both preventive measures (such as life-long education and training) and remedial ones (training for older workers lacking specific skills, for example in new technology). This sort of strategy would also help to avoid intergenerational friction.

Therefore we may conclude that although it is possible to isolate specific examples of effective measures to combat age barriers in recruitment and training and to recommend their widespread replication, an integrated approach is the most effective way to both prevent and overcome all forms of age discrimination in employment. Some of the portfolio examples and case studies illustrate the dangers of continuing exclusion among certain groups of older workers. For example not all groups of older workers have an equal chance of participating in training initiatives - ethnic minority groups may remain excluded (POPE) and the unskilled age 55 and over may be excluded when the 40-50 year old skilled group is favoured (IBM - Skill Team, IBM-Sernet). On the other hand there are good examples of older unskilled workers being targeted (Passantenhuis, Trento, GFAW). Moreover it must be acknowledged that special measures for older workers may have negative consequences for younger ones - though there was no evidence of this in the case studies.

This final section includes some of the key recommendations, designed to encourage the spread of good practice at all levels of the European labour markets, selected from the full list contained in **Combating Age Barriers in Employment - A European Research Report**. The recommendations are addressed to the different actors in employment policy and practice.

### ■ **Employers**

Combating age barriers and developing good practice in age management must be organisation-led. European governments have taken various forms of action at a macro level and the social partners now have important roles to play. Employers of labour, public and private, have the responsibility to create the conditions in which employees can manage their own careers and ageing. They have to recognise the implications of an ageing workforce. These are the key action points for employers who have decided to take concerted action to develop good practice in age management:

- development of an age-awareness policy aimed at all levels of the organisation, to be introduced in the form of an experiment which measures the impact on job recruitment, training and other aspects of employment;

- introduction of age-awareness training for HR personnel, managers and other key personnel;
- involvement of older workers themselves in discussions about age barriers and how to overcome them;
- supporting individuals or groups of staff who want to develop initiatives to combat age barriers.
- examination of the impact of seniority rules (especially those governing pay) and encouragement of more horizontal rather than vertical career movements;

For employers who do not want to embark on the extensive programme of measures outlined above, there are three key recommendations intended to make initial progress on combating age barriers in recruitment and training:

- examination of organisation's recruitment practices to see if age is used inappropriately;
- removal of age barriers in job advertisements;
- use of non-age specific training methods and, where necessary, training methods that are sensitive to the special learning requirements of older workers.

It is important to recognise differences between large and small/medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and the importance of the latter to European labour markets (for example in the Netherlands: 92 per cent of businesses have fewer than 10 employees and, in the EU as a whole, 90 per cent of workers are employed by SMEs).

While many of the above recommendations may be applied wholly or partially to SMEs, for example the removal of age barriers in recruitment and the use of non-age specific training methods, it is obvious that others require a sizeable organisational infrastructure. Nonetheless, as the examples of Fontijne and SISEMA show, it is possible for both medium-size and small organisations to develop measures to combat age barriers and the employment prospects of older workers in Europe depend on them doing so. In the case of small businesses there is clearly an important role for trade associations, chambers of commerce or



other umbrella organisations in creating the economies of scale to make some forms of training viable.

### ■ Ageing Workers

If a primary duty of employers is to create the conditions in which individuals can manage their own careers and ageing then the latter have a parallel duty to take advantage of that opportunity. Likewise older workers outside employment need support and encouragement to take some responsibility for improving their own employment prospects. Some specific recommendations to ageing workers are:

- assessing their own training and career development needs;
- communicating training needs to managers;
- taking advantage of all training opportunities;
- acting as mentors to young people;
- adjusting to late career horizontal rather than vertical shifts (and the change in seniority-related wage increments that this will entail).

### ■ Trade Unions

At the workplace it is undoubtedly the case that trade unions continue to face a dilemma: whether to defend the interests of current members or to promote their future interests. The following key recommendations may help to overcome this dilemma:

- representing the interests of all workers regardless of age;
- including in collective agreements recruitment and training measures which rectify the disadvantage experienced by older workers;
- undergoing age-awareness training;
- assisting older members to self-advocate about their access to training and career development advice;
- recognising the need for traditional career development patterns to alter.

## ■ National Employer and Trade Union Organisations

There is an important role for national organisations of employers and trade unions in highlighting the relationship between age and employment and disseminating examples of good practice to their members through education and information campaigns. In particular they should educate their local representatives about the disadvantages created by age barriers. These organisations can also act as a channel for information from other EU countries. Professional organisations - such as the Institute of Personnel and Development in the UK - can play an important part in the dissemination of good practice.

## ■ NGOs in the Employment Field

An important feature of this research is the demonstration of the significant contribution that NGOs can make to this field. The importance of both the health and social care sector and environmental protection for employment and economic regeneration in Europe emphasises the potential for NGO-led projects to recruit and/or train older workers or to assist their recruitment by others (such as the Middelaes Hospital, Passantenhuis and L'Incontro Cooperative). Governments and local authorities should recognise and support this type of activity because it can promote both local/regional economic regeneration and the combating of age barriers. Moreover, as the examples of Trento and GFAW demonstrate, job creation for older unemployed men and women via NGOs can be highly cost effective.

## ■ National Governments

The importance of the policy context for the development of good practice in age management has been amply illustrated by this project. The Member States occupy three crucial roles with regard to combating age barriers: they may directly finance or subsidise initiatives; regulate the labour market, or society in general, to oppose age barriers; and/or provide non-mandatory encouragement to employers. European Union and national government support proved crucial in several initiatives (public and private). In a few case studies it was regional government that proved crucial and, where regional institutions exist, the good practice initiatives should be used to demonstrate the enormous

potential for action to create employment for excluded older workers and so contribute to local and national economic regeneration. National action is recommended on several fronts to ensure that governments lead by example as employers, contractors, legislators and rule makers.

**Education:**

- raising the awareness of employers to the hidden costs of age discrimination and the loss of older workers;
- public education to counteract the negative images of older workers and false stereotypes and to disseminate good practice (eg. Getting-On campaign in UK, the National Bureau on Age Discrimination in the Netherlands).

**Employment Policy:**

- governments should not take any policy action which counteracts existing incentives for companies to retain staff;
- the need for general employment policies which put greater emphasis on preventing unemployment and encouraging older workers to continue in employment;
- consideration should be given to the provision of short term subsidies for employers taking on older workers, for example in the form of reductions in taxes or social contributions;
- removal of age barriers in government job creation and training schemes;
- development of active labour market policies to aid the integration of disadvantaged groups such as older workers through, for example, the improvement of labour market services.
- the development of preventive measures for those in and outside employment.

**Pensions and Social Security Policies:**

It is important for national governments to examine closely the relationship between pensions, social security and redundancy payments regulations and the employment of older workers. In at least two countries (Greece and Italy) they acted as a barrier to the development of good practice.

**Specific Initiatives for the Inclusion of Older Workers:**

In recruitment, it is important to recognise the distinction between internal and external recruitment. Internal recruitment may include older workers when, at the same time, this group is being excluded by the external recruitment process. The latter is easier for policy to tackle and this will influence the former.

- ban age limits in recruitment (as in Canada and the US and as intended in the Netherlands);
- encourage companies to establish comprehensive action programmes in age and employment - by publishing good practice guides, spreading information about successful initiatives, disseminating age awareness literature and course material;
- action to set standards in training (age aware quality standard) and in particular to encourage and assist SMEs in training;
- funding for NGOs to develop pilot projects.

**■ European Union**

The European Commission has a vital role to play in this area by disseminating examples of good practice and encouraging the transfer of knowledge between the Member States. The national differences in the social partners' understanding of the implications of ageing workforces and in the emphasis given to different aspects of good practice highlight the importance of the Commission's networking role. The key recommendations for action at EU level are:

- close examination of the Commission's own recruitment practices in order to eliminate age barriers;
- encourage greater sharing of knowledge and expertise on the relationships between age and employment and the implementation of good practice;
- include special measures for older workers in the next reform of the ESF;
- initiation of discussions with European organisations representing the social partners and representatives of older people about how age barriers may be addressed.



The 1995 **Council Resolution on the Employment of Older Workers** called on the European Commission to organise an exchange of information, experience and good practice concerning the employment of older workers. The research summarised here is intended as a significant contribution towards that goal. This European Foundation project has demonstrated that, in a range of EU countries, some employers, in both the public and private sectors and NGOs have begun to develop good practice in the recruitment and training of older workers.

We are not pretending that the examples quoted are representative nor that the majority of older workers across the EU do not continue to face age discrimination. But, rather, our intention was to seek out examples of good practice so that they may be used to illustrate both the existence of such initiatives and the lessons that might be learned from their implementation. Although it is only a minority of organisations that are taking action to combat age barriers, the fact that some **are** showing the way, and that they include leading European commercial companies and major public authorities, indicates a growing awareness of the importance of this issue.

There is no doubt that the Member States have begun to address the age and employment paradox - the coexistence of workforce

ageing and extensive early exit - and now it is time for the social partners to take action. Hence the focus of this research on the practical steps necessary to achieve good practice. The social and economic policy context is currently favourable towards combating age barriers and, as this research has shown, there are good commercial as well as human resource management reasons for doing so. The **European Portfolio** contains over 150 examples of good practice initiatives from nine countries, while **Combating Age Barriers in Employment** reports the practical lessons to be learned from the detailed case studies carried out in seven countries. The clear messages from this work are, first, that good practice in job recruitment and training benefits an organisation as a whole and not just older workers and, secondly, that failure to combat age barriers means the wasting of human resources, a risky business when faced with an ageing workforce.

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## Appendix 1

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Robert Anderson  
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The project was also informed by the European policy expertise of *Elizabeth Drury*.

## Appendix 2

## Profile of case studies

Country/Name	Main Focus	Sector Classification	Size of Organisation
<b>BELGIUM</b>			
1. IBM Skill Team	Recruitment	Private Business Services	Medium
2. Onze Lieve Vrouw Middelares Hospital	Recruitment	Private Health Care	Medium
3. The Passantenhuis (day centre)	Recruitment	Non-Profit Social Care	Small
<b>FRANCE</b>			
1. Furniture Company	Recruitment	Private Manufacturing	Large
2. Insurance Company	Flexible Employment	Public-Profit Financial Services	Large
3. Chemicals Company	Flexible Employment	Private Manufacturing	Large
<b>GERMANY</b>			
1. GFAW (Thuringia)	Recruitment	Public Employment Agency	Small
2. Stahlwerke Bremen	Training Ergonomics	Private Steel Production	Large
3. Wilkhahn GmbH & Co	Integrated	Private Furniture Manufacturing	Large

**GREECE**

1. TITAN Group	Training Recruitment	Private Cement Manufacturing	Large
2. DELTA Model Milk Industry	Training	Private Food Production & Distribution	Large
3. SISEMA (Car Mechanics Association)	Training	Non-profit Trade Association	Large

**ITALY**

1. L'Incontro Coop	Recruitment Flexible Employment	Non-profit Social care	Small
2. IBM Sernet	Recruitment	Private Business Services	Small
3. Province of Trento (Employment Agency)	Recruitment	Public Public Administration	Large

**NETHERLANDS**

1. Fontijne Holland	Training	Private Machine Engineering	Medium
2. Forum Wisselwerk (Job Exchange)	Training Flexible Employment	Non-profit Business Services	Small
3. DSM	Integrated	Private Chemical Production	Large

**UNITED KINGDOM**

1. St Ivel	Integrated	Private Food Production & Distribution	Large
2. Glaxo R&D	Integrated	Private Research and Development	Large
3. POPE Recruitment Agency	Recruitment Training	Non-Profit Employment Agency	Small
4. London Borough of Hounslow	Integrated	Public Public administration	Large

Source: National Reports

Note: Small = under 100 employees Medium = 100-149 Large = 500 plus



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# COMBATING AGE BARRIERS IN EMPLOYMENT

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

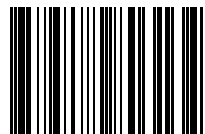
This booklet summarises the main results and conclusions for an EU-wide study of measures to improve the employment prospects of an ageing workforce. The impact of population ageing on employment and the labour market is increasingly recognised as one of the most pressing issues confronting European societies. This summary charts the initiatives being taken to reverse trends for early retirement and exit from the labour market towards retention, reintegration and retraining of older workers. The lessons from and recommendations for action are directly and urgently relevant to governments, social partners and all in the ageing workforce.



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