Age-related management as a change process to develop equal opportunities in organisations. A focus on the Belgian situation.

Joke Manshoven, Hilda Martens, Anneleen Vandenberk, Frank Lambrechts

Contact:
Joke Manshoven
Researcher
Hasselt University
Agoralaan D
3590 Diepenbeek (Belgium)
University Campus – Building D Applied Economics (TEW-MMC)
Research group: SEIN / Development of Human Potential
Phone: 0032/11/268669 Fax: 0032/11/268766
Email: joke.manshoven@uhasselt.be

Abstract

Traditionally, age-related management is orientated towards the 'older' employees in the organisation. Initiatives and measures are taken to keep 'them' longer on the labor market.
Within the framework of a project of the European Social Fund (ESF) – 'Silver Instruments and Processes' – we believe that age-related management is a relevant aspect during the whole career. All employees, of all ages, benefit by a well developed age-related management in the organisation. An equal treatment of all employees concerning age-related initiatives is the main goal. Developing an age-friendly HR management within organisations is a change process in which learning and recognition of a shared challenge play a crucial role.

Since the seventies, Belgian government has encouraged people to choose for early retirement, without almost any personal offers to be made. Over the years it has become a commonplace belief that elderly employees should retire prematurely. Today, due to demographic and economic developments, this situation is no longer feasible.
We encourage companies to develop an age-conscious HR management. In line with the specific company culture, we develop a tailor-made change process in which all actors within the company can (re)consider the issue of working longer, which should result in new viewpoints, customs and age-friendly HR practices.

Keywords: age, labor market, qualitative empirical interpretation, organisational change

1. Introduction

Implementing HR management policies where there is constant consideration of the various life stages in which people find themselves requires a different way of organising and another way of thinking within an organisation. By our specific approach we attempt to reduce resistances and to bring the positive forces for change within organisations to the surface.
People, and therefore organisations, don't easily change. The majority of organisations, it seems, fail to achieve high-quality change (Schein, 1996, 2003a, 2003b). People resist change in a variety of ways; they are against modifying their behaviour and their habits, whether or not these are solidly engrained.
Both individual and social factors effect our resistance to change (Corthouts et al., 1991). Resistance to change is not an immutable character trait, but usually arises from a misunderstanding of what is happening. Such resistance makes us realise that we need to make the right preparations for change.

Alongside resistance to change there are other factors that speed up the process of change. Forces for change encourage the willingness to change. They can be the forces that led to change, but they can also arise during the change process.

2. A "process" approach

Schein (2000) developed an approach to organisational change and learning within an organisation.

According to Schein, the 'manner in which' something is done is as important or even more important than 'what' is done. The 'how' or the 'process' generally communicates what we really intend more clearly than the content of what we are saying. People are in general far less familiar with the process. Usually far more attention is paid to the content, that is, 'what' we are saying.

It is difficult to think in the context of processes whilst also developing processes. It is therefore in the first instance essential to become conscious of the various processes that influence our daily life (interpersonal processes, group processes, organisational and co-operative processes, etc.).

When we are looking for organisational change from the process approach, it is important that we create a situation in which people and groups can learn and change. In practice it turns out that organisations have great difficulty with implementing 'process learning' (Probst & Büchel, 1997, 36), where the people concerned learn from each other how they tackled the change process and how they might do it better in the future. Lessons on how to learn better from each other are barely learned (Schein, 1996, 2003a). The basis of these learning problems is, according to Schein (1996, 2003a, 2003b), essentially relational in nature. One can distinguish three occupational cultures within each organisation: the top, the administration and the shop floor. These three cultures often do not understand each other well, are poorly co-ordinated with each other, and one of these cultures sometimes dominates the others. Schein (1996, 2003a) considers that this lack of co-ordination explains why high-quality change and process learning so rarely occur in organisations.

It is crucial to assist the organisation in search of ideas for further development. Double-loop and triple-loop learning are in this way actively stimulated within an organisation. Learning to have the will to do something and learning to dare relate to more profound learning processes (De Weerdt, 2003), which can find a place within HR practices that support lifelong learning and working.

The approach that we use within the European Social Fund (ESF) project – 'Silver Instruments and Processes' – is based on Schein's process approach. We aim to set in motion and further develop age-conscious HR policies within companies by means of this project. We strongly believe that 'the manner in which' and 'with whom' one sets up new practices are crucial within age-conscious HR management. For this reason we assist those involved to find out how we can give shape to age-conscious HR management, and then support this process.

We make use of a number of concrete principles when helping organisations in their quest for further development (e.g. Martens, 1997). The core of these principles consists in developing tailor-made processes together with the participants involved in order to achieve a win-win situation.

The contributions, support and commitment of all parties concerned are most important factors in organisational development. A first important stage that is often overlooked is the creation of support and awareness in all the parties involved. 'People cannot do something in which they see no sense and to which they attach no value' (Sels et al., 2002, 28).

A number of specific projects are being developed for companies in the area of age-conscious HR management within the context of the 'Silver Instruments and Processes' project. Age-conscious HR management is directed at all employees, not just the older age-group, with the aim of keeping workers motivated and employable, and to guarantee sufficient quality of work and well-being (SERV, 2001). The most important aim of age-conscious policy is to increase and maintain workers' motivation and employability.

3. Working longer in Belgium

We seek to initiate and develop age-conscious HR policies in companies, on the assumption that the legal and statutory environment will eventually encourage working longer. Our aim is to pro-actively search within the organisation for new possibilities, emphasising the contribution of the organisation's employees.

The following is a short account of the Belgian situation in the areas of career ending, activity level and the prospects for the future. We will also place the situation in its Belgian historical context.

Belgium within Europe

All European countries are making efforts to increase the overall employment rate. The employment rate is defined as the active working age population (number of people) as a percentage of the population (net employment rate) aged 15-64.

The average employment rate within the EU (25) is estimated at 65.2%. In Finland and in Denmark we respectively see rates of 68.4% and 75.9%. In Belgium the employment rate is 61.1% (situation 2005).

Given that the Lisbon Strategy aims for a European employment rate of 70% by 2010, Belgium (but also other European countries) must put forth serious effort to meet this goal.

One of the greatest challenges is the low employment rate of the older workforce (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003). Only one out of three people between the ages of 55 and 64 is employed, i.e. a low rate of 31.8%. This is 10.7% lower than the European average. There has been a positive evolution during the last 4 years in Belgium, in 2001 only 25.1% of the people between the ages of 55 and 64 was employed. Today 31.8% is employed; an increase of 6.7%, but compared with the European average, namely 42.5%, (EU 25) it stills remains very low. This improvement in Belgium is mainly attributable to a new segment of women who show a higher employment level than the past generations (Goyvaerts, 2004).

The low level of activity among the elderly working population in Belgium can be ascribed to the systematic reduction in the statutory pensionable age since the end of World War II. The OESO estimates that the real pension age decreased from an average of 64.3 in 1950 to 57.7 in 2000. Today, the average Belgian works until the age of 57 (Goyvaerts, 2004). This is below the statutory pensionable age of 65. In the last 50 years, the introduction of social welfare legislation has led to a 10-year reduction in active working life. The post-active period increased by 19 years in the latter part of the twentieth century because of the decrease in active years and higher life expectancy. In some cases the post-active years exceed the active years. In conclusion, we believe that the active period is too short (25-57: +/- 30 years) and the inactive period is too long (0-25 and 57-75/80 =+/- 50 years) (Martens, 2004).

The Belgian context

The Belgian context is a special case as regards keeping older employees in work for longer and in a different way and implementing age-conscious HR policies. The Belgian practice of retaining older employees and implementing age-conscious HR policies is unusual. The government has, from the 1970s, developed a framework in which people are in effect encouraged to leave the world of work, and older workers are rarely offered suitable individual options. The emphasis for older workers is usually: 'You have made your contribution, you have worked well and hard for so many years, so you can enjoy

your rest early and thus give younger people a chance.' This kind of attitude has over time become a credo and has taken a profound hold on the attitudes of the various actors (employers, trade unions and employees). Transitional pension schemes are a good illustration. Early retirement schemes to encourage older workers to exit their jobs prematurely were developed together by the government, employers and trade unions! Everyone considered this an advantageous situation, until it was realised that the present-day situation could be termed somewhat problematic, to say the least.

Within this inconsistent government framework, which encourages early retirement and at the same time calls for people to stay in work longer, we propose to start up and develop age-conscious HR policies in companies.

The most important objective is to set up a timetable and plan for organisational development. By raising awareness and creating support for a tailor-made process that stimulates reflection on the concepts of being obliged/wanting to work longer, the process of change will get underway and this will eventually result in different viewpoints, ideas and habits. We anticipate that the government will soon issue new regulations to extend people's working lives. The 'Generatiepact' is a first step. This document consists of 66 measures which will result in rules and laws. The 66 measures aim at convincing employees to work longer. In consideration of this dynamic social and legal environment, we hope to pro-actively assist all members of organisations in their quest for universally acceptable alternatives.

We do not exclude coercion and pressure to arrive at changed ideas and practices as regards working longer in the future. Coercion and pressure may be necessary but not sufficient to change ideas and practices regarding longer working hours, but these alone will not be sufficient to achieve organisational learning. Our research has led us to concentrate on a participative approach which is necessary to achieve organisational learning and change alongside changing external factors.

4. Case studies – Organisations in the Belgian context implementing age-conscious HR policies

Our purpose is to assist Belgian organisations to further develop age-conscious HR policies.

It is important that employers, management, personnel management, trade unions and employees work together at the start to identify a shared vision of the current and desired situation regarding an age-conscious organisation and HR policies. In this way a shared basis of support within an organisation will be achieved. Arriving at a shared vision implies that the parties involved enter into discussions about their experiences, perceptions, expectations and wishes. A change process must be driven by a constant, constructive dialogue between all parties. The process does not start with a rigidly defined and completed plan, but develops gradually, stage by stage (Martens, Vandenberk, De Weerdt, 2004).

Tools have been developed that are specific to organisations. We first enter into consultation with the organisations in question: What do they expect? Are there specific themes that apply to their organisation? Which context does the organisation work in? And so on. On the basis of the information gathered, we then develop an approach that is tailored for the company, and takes into account the specific context within which an organisation functions. We concentrate on two concrete tools, as follows: (1) awareness-raising and creating a basis of support and (2) stimulating knowledge transfer.

Awareness-raising and creating a basis of support

Practices in organisations are often fed by stereotypes, such as the belief that older employees are less productive and far too expensive, they are not flexible and they are unwilling to be trained or to follow courses, they are more likely to suffer health problems and so on.

There is also the idea that older employees are more loyal and have more experience, they are more familiar with organisational culture, more willing to take on responsibility and that they bring calm to an organisation.

Not only is HR policy fed by these stereotypes, but older employees tend to modify their behaviour to fit in with them. Stereotypes and prejudices are therefore reinforced from both sides. A first important step is to ensure that people within an organisation are aware of the existence of these stereotypes, and that they realise that actions can be undertaken to promote age-conscious HR policies. In other words, raising awareness and creating a basis of support are essential stages in order to implement further actions throughout an organisation with the support of the entire organisation.

Focus groups were organised on the initiative of HR departments in order to start up concrete activities in various companies. Focus group meetings, attended by management, trade unions and employees (8-10 participants per group) were facilitated by an ESF researcher. Each meeting lasted an average of two hours.

These focus groups had a threefold purpose: (1) creating awareness and changing mentalities, (2) diagnosing helpful and obstructive factors regarding longer working, and (3) collecting ideas and suggestions.

In every case it was emphasised at all levels that this was not a question of the company abolishing or sustaining transitional pensions, but using studies and surveys to find possible ways of keeping older and younger employees working effectively and enjoyably for longer. This will most likely be necessary as a result of changing regulations. Participating companies will then have taken the first hurdle, namely, awareness-raising and dealing with resistance. Those companies will be ready to act because they have already studied and planned possible actions with all the interested parties.

The need for age-conscious HR policies was first demonstrated by using macro-economic data which was then linked to the vision and mission of organisations. Numbers and charts illustrating participant's age structure generally caused eyebrows to be raised in amazement.

Constructive efforts were made to establish the responsibilities of companies and the areas where legal and statutory elements predominate. In this way the persons involved were confronted with the real situation and the prospects for the future (creating awareness and changing mentalities).

Figure 1. Statements for exchanging ideas, used as an icebreaker.

Agree or disagree?
1. The number of accidents at work decreases with age. 2. Older workers are less frequently off sick than younger workers. 3. Older employees learn in a different way and more slowly. 4. Training is mainly of interest to young employees. Older employees need less additional training thanks to their experience and are also less inclined to make use of the training that is available. 5. Because older employees are less flexible, stress-resistant and prepared to change, and also because they work at a slower pace, younger employees are better suited to taking on functions which carry a high level of responsibility. 6. I believe that older employees should make way for younger ones.

Subsequently we focused on the following questions: 'What factors will make you work/keep on working enjoyably, enthusiastically and effectively? What factors prevent you from working longer? What can your organisation do to make you want to keep on working?' (see Table 1).

There was an exchange of views and the group decided on a number of priorities, on the assumption that not everything could be dealt with at once. These action points were developed further in a subsequent phase.

The results from the focus groups were discussed with management and ESF researchers.

Table 1. Questions in the focus groups.

1. What factors will make you work/keep on working enjoyably, enthusiastically and effectively? 2. What factors prevent you from working longer? 3. What can your organisation do to make you want to keep on working?

Organising such focus groups ensures that all the interested parties feel that they have been heard and want to learn together. A first important step in arriving at organisational learning is becoming aware of the current situation and being convinced of the usefulness of change. We question current principles of age-conscious HR management by means of focus groups. Can such principles still be maintained within a constantly changing context, in which we have to deal with increasing numbers of older employees, a diminishing intake of young workers and a changing legislative environment? In the long run, is it not necessary to do things differently within an organisation if we want to keep on functioning and competing?

A concrete example
This approach was applied to a manufacturer of polyethylene and polypropylene. The company is of Scandinavian origins headquartered in Denmark. The company has four sites in Belgium employing some 900 workers. Age distribution is within the normal range, the company is regarded as a good employer by its staff, and employee turnover is low. The company operates in a highly competitive international environment where restructuring every two or three years seems to be the rule.

The organisation's HR manager and the HR mangers at the various sites worked with ESF to guide the process. To kick-off, exploratory discussions were held with management to gain an overview of the company's specific situation and the desired outcomes. On the basis of this first stage it was decided to work with focus groups so that everyone in the organisation could be made aware of the necessity of age-conscious HR management.

Focus groups were organised at the four sites on the initiative of the HR departments. The statements concerning older employees gave rise to considerable soul-searching. All the parties involved were shocked when confronted with the real situation (by means of numerical data; see figure 2). Older employees were being forced to retire, while there was a very large group of employees aged 35 to 45. If at any time all these employees were to leave en masse there would be a huge problem.

Figure 2. Presentation of numerical data.

Below we have the results of the focus groups. For the discussion purposes a classification was made according to:
- motives not to work any longer (see table 2)
- motives to keep working longer (see table 3),
- actions and measures that need to be taken to make it possible to work longer.

Table 2. What factors prevent you from working longer?

Work circumstances	– work environment
	– stress, pressure of work
	– the feeling that you have to prove yourself
	– constant and frequent changes
	– bureaucracy
	– not being able to keep up with new technology
	– working days are too long
	– the weeks are too full
	– change of work location
	– change in working circumstances (return to shift work, no more shifts, etc.)
	– not being valued
Work-private life relationship	– health
	– home situation
	– wanting to do 'other' things (travel, hobbies)
	– adopt the same pace of life as one's partner
	– traffic jams, tired of travelling
	– fear of not being able to enjoy life 'later on'
Financial motives	– small financial difference between working and not working any longer
	– don't really need the money any more
Environmental factors	– restructurings
	– ambiguous attitude from the government
	– retiring early has become the norm

Table 3. What would motivate you to work longer?

| Work circumstances | – the feeling that I could still achieve something |

	− chances of promotion
	− being valued, being respected
	− maintaining a favourable pace of work
	− an interesting, meaningful job, filled with challenges
	− taking pleasure in my work
	− social contacts
	− freedom to make decisions
	− chances to work part-time
	− chances to work on projects, acting as a coach or mentor
	− chances to work at home
Work-private life relationship	− fear of falling into a 'black hole'
	− the same or a different pace of life from that of my partner
	− health
	− location, limited travelling
Financial motives	− value added salary; sufficient difference between pension and salary

Proposed actions and measures

The information above illustrates the numerous suggestions made about organisational policy and, most of all, about job content and work circumstances. Regarding the organisation, people expect clear information, transparent procedures, a clear standpoint on which one can have one's say by means of discussions, and freedom to express one's views with various groups.

Regarding job content, there are a great number of possibilities, such as being given time to do quality work, creating jobs in order to pass on experience, mentorship, mentoring, necessary redundancy and building up reserves, expanding home working, ignoring age when promoting staff, time credits, flexible hours, designing flexible phased retirement schemes with planned reduction in working hours, providing more information, promoting part-time work, providing opportunities to transfer to another section within an organisation.

People of a certain age should be able to take time off in exchange for:
- working night shifts
- working intensively on a project for six months
- job sharing
- redistributing administrative work.

On the subject of the working environment, workers spoke of:
- not being forced to take retirement
- no moral pressures, but rather personalised flexibility
- space for sports and games
- more thought being given to career planning and provision of career counselling
- being given the time to learn
- permission to briefly interrupt work
- building a positive atmosphere through team building
- checking on employee contentment
- leave, sabbatical leave with a guarantee of tenure
- social activities
- stimulating healthy living
- retraining and education.

Subsequent stages

The results from the focus groups were discussed at the various sites with management and ESF researchers. It was observed that the idea of working longer was already widespread on the worksites. The necessity of age-conscious HR policies, was now linked with the organisation's vision and mission to achieve diversity and sustainable

entrepreneurship. In other words, management was engaged in double- and triple-loop learning. It was now time to look at 'why questions', questions that make us reconsider the essential principles of the organisation. Why do we or do we not want to keep older employees in the organisation? What value do they add? Will the present principle of making everyone over a certain age retire still be feasible and desirable in the longer term? Would the current rarely utilised job sharing and time credit systems within the current rules still be viable if a large group of people were to want such schemes? What kind of organisation do we want for our (older) employees?

Management was now looking for frameworks and preconditions within which the company could develop age-conscious HR policies. Macro-economic insights were translated to the intermediate level, the company level. Two people were appointed internally to develop the project further and to consult with sites in other countries. The positive output of the project was that concrete work was being done by the organisation and at the organisation's tempo, on initiatives concerning age-conscious HR policy.
Employees and trade unions will be involved at a subsequent stage in concrete follow-up actions (micro level).
Raising the awareness of all the parties involved is a first important step towards encouraging other ideas, insights and viewpoints regarding working longer and possibly in another way.

Our approach encourages the organisation to learn at the organisational level; we try to encourage all the parties involved to work together in developing new ideas about working longer and age-conscious HR policies.

Stimulating knowledge transfer
An additional methodology developed in the framework of the ESF 'Silver Instruments and Processes' research project is the encouragement of knowledge transfer within organisations.
With these methods we aim to create a favourable learning climate, where knowledge transfer can be encouraged in a positive environment. Increasing 'pride in one's work', and strengthening and energising the work and co-operation of the team are central throughout the knowledge transfer process. A positive climate of learning and co-operation and a constructive way of dealing with people based on interpersonal skills, are crucial preconditions for knowledge transfer.

Sharing knowledge is extremely important for employees of all ages. The result will be an extension of one's own competencies and the organisation's expectations will be met (Ilmarinen, 1999). In addition, knowledge-sharing is a quick, effective and efficient method that enables organisations to meet constantly higher demands.
Organisational change and learning are closely linked to stimulating knowledge-transfer (both tacit and explicit).

Tacit, that is experience-based knowledge, is very personal and context-specific, and is therefore difficult to explain. This kind of knowledge is inextricably linked to personal experiences, convictions, norms and values (see inter alia, Polanyi, 1967; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Tacit knowledge is stored in an individual's brain and body, and is also termed person-related knowledge. This knowledge has both cognitive and technical dimensions.

Explicit knowledge can be laid down in theoretical or codified form, so that it can more easily be passed on. This does not mean that explicit knowledge is more objective and easier to verify than tacit knowledge, but that this knowledge can easily be passed on verbally or in writing. Practical experience is not essential in order to fully master this knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). This is the knowledge that we find in books, manuals, databases, notes, etc.

In the context of knowledge management, the objective is to disseminate as much individual (tacit and explicit) knowledge as possible, so that this becomes organisational knowledge. In this way, this knowledge remains present in an organisation, because there is no longer dependence on one person to retain it. The possibility that people will implement this knowledge in their work will increase, resulting in improved corporate efficiency and effectiveness.

Learning is important for older employees. In today's stressful and competitive work environment success requires more than just experience.
However, thanks to their experience older employees have at their disposal a great deal of tacit knowledge about their organisation such as how to implement tasks, certain operations, sensitivities within the organisation, and so on. In the present-day context it is hard to predict when older employees will leave their organisation. The time when one could be certain that older employees would be there until their 65th birthday is long gone. Older employees can leave an organisation very suddenly; one only needs to think of restructurings with redundancies, relocations, implementing transitional pensions, and so on. Unless it wants to lose all the knowledge that older employees have available to them, an organisation must prepare itself for a possible sudden exit of older employees. Where no steps are taken to transfer knowledge, the knowledge (especially tacit knowledge) leaves the organisation along with the older worker.

Companies are often unaware of this situation and do not see the usefulness of knowledge transfer. A first step therefore is to demonstrate the necessity of knowledge transfer. This is done by presenting macro-economic developments. Numbers and data about age structures, both in the Belgian economy and in the company itself, are discussed. Does the organisation as it is now functioning actually make sufficient use of the knowledge that is present amongst its personnel of all ages? Are people in the organisation aware of the changes outlined above (possible sudden exit of older employees, specific knowledge areas of employees, etc.). In this way the need to be involved in knowledge transfer is explained and emphasised.
The second stage is making a record of the knowledge that is present within an organisation. The following questions are central to this: What specific knowledge can we, or do we want to, pass on from our profession or expertise? What is this knowledge about? This is about the WHAT. One automatically comes to the distinction between theoretical or explicit knowledge, and experience-based or tacit knowledge.
What possibilities are there to pass on this knowledge? In other words, what are the possible ways to pass on knowledge? This is about the manner in which, the HOW. It will quickly become apparent that the manner in which knowledge is transmitted is strongly dependent on the type of knowledge. Tacit knowledge cannot be transmitted in the same way as explicit knowledge.
A third stage involves investigation into the conditions that govern that one is involved in knowledge transfer. It should, after all, be possible to transfer knowledge within an organisation. In other words, it is necessary to create a favourable learning climate in which knowledge can easily be transferred. If knowledge transfer is necessary, then it is also necessary to create an environment in which it can happen.
A climate of open exchange and discourse encourages new ways of transferring knowledge. People are encouraged to work together to create a favourable learning climate, one in which knowledge can be transferred and appreciated.

A concrete example
Within the context of the ESF 'Silver Instruments and Processes' project this methodology was applied to an organisation where tacit knowledge is extremely important. The ESF process was guided from central management by the HR manager and the careers adviser. The trade union representative and the immediate section head were also supporting the project. The HR manager, the careers adviser, the trade union representative and section head, went in search of organisation-specific pointers for age-conscious HR policy. Exploratory discussions were held to discover what was actually

happening within the organisation and where improvements could be made. On the basis of these discussions, it was decided that, after awareness-raising, attention should be paid above all to knowledge transfer within and between sections.

The first phase of the project was directed at some 30 people, spread over three generations, skilled in old crafts such as thatching roofs, constructing wattle and daub walls, making wooden carts, and so on. This approach would subsequently be applied to other sections.

To start, macro-economic and company-specific data were again presented in order to demonstrate the importance of knowledge transfer. In order for all the parties involved to find out about learning from one another and passing on knowledge, we made a visit to the trial ESF project 'Knowledge pool 50+'. The purpose of this project is to give older employees a new, meaningful role within their company by making them into trainers for other teams. At the same time, the project generates know-how on methods of capturing, preserving and disseminating tacit knowledge in companies.

In a second phase the knowledge present in a section was recorded. It quickly became clear that tacit knowledge was the most important for the kind of work that was being done. Attention until then had mostly been paid to the proper documentation and capturing of explicit knowledge (in a training course, work patterns, by means of pictorial materials, etc.). But there is another process that is at least as important, namely, improving co-operation between generations. Better co-operation automatically signifies better knowledge transfer, and the group investigates ways of fostering this co-operation.

A subsequent stage searches for the conditions necessary to encourage knowledge transfer. Which factors (such as consultation amongst employees, consultation between various sections, etc.) are facilitating or obstructing knowledge transfer at this time within a section? The kinds of factors that are relevant here concern internal communication between employees.

We started in the spring of 2004 with two craftsmen teams. The intention was to co-operate and to create knowledge around questions such as 'How can we transmit knowledge and co-operate more satisfactorily?' and 'How can we increase pride in craftsmanship?' Group perceptions and experiences were considered and discussions started on topics such as:

- What factors make you work/co-operate enjoyably, enthusiastically and effectively?
- What factors reduce your desire to work/co-operate?
- What can the organisation do to make you more motivated and co-operative? This concerns the conditions that need to be created in order to be able to work together well and transfer knowledge effectively.
- What would a career in the organisation have to look like to bring this about?

We assume with these questions that 'the better you work together with others and the greater enthusiasm you have for your work, the faster knowledge transfer and learning from each other can happen'.

The assumption behind these questions is that an increase in worker enthusiasm and willingness to co-operate will automatically lead to faster and easier knowledge transfer.

During a session participants interviewed each other in pairs, so that each questions the other as a critical assistant to bring the other's story into clearer focus. The account was then presented to a large group so that they could see the account 'like a film playing before their eyes' and could pick up on or amplify points. Subsequently everyone came together in the larger group and gave their account individually. The most salient points were put onto a flipboard. High-priority points for improvement based on experiences, opinions and accounts were gathered and reinforced. Based on this process, actions to bring about improvement were presented to the project steering group. This steering group was made up of the co-ordinator of the ESF project, a process facilitator from the ESF project, the HR manager, a careers guide, the section head of the technical services

and three foremen. Two crucial working points around which the action proposals were formulated were:

1. The need for consultation at every level (teams, between foremen, etc.) and between the various levels (foremen with their superiors, etc.).

2. The call to make the foreman's job function more central so as to restore full value to what was now a diminished function.

We then decided to expand the initiative to the entire technical service and to go through the same process with the rest of the workers so that everyone would feel that they were also owners of the concrete improvement actions. The logistical service and the gardens department were also involved in the project, which signified an extension to 34 people. We extended the initiative for various reasons:

- We wanted everyone to be a co-creator of the process in order to generate a wider basis of support and ownership.

- The positive noises that were reaching us from the steering group: 'People state that the chances for improvement are important'. This is very unusual in a rigid, hierarchical state culture where the dominant mode is top-down implementation of actions decided without consultation.

- A local initiative signifies little in terms of support basis and power, but expansion of the initiative generates more power.

- We want to know what other people think about it. This does generate confirmation but there are other equally valid emphases which we then take on board during the change process.

Subsequently the steering group came together again to discuss further steps and a memo was drawn up to give the initiative and its results visibility at a high executive and political level.

5. Conclusion

ESF involvement and approach set in motion a change process that changed HR practices and habits.

Management, employees and trade unions were encouraged to adjust their vision and values with regard to working longer. Working longer and more diversity on the shop floor need to be seen as positive elements, and this change requires the learning of new practices and habits.

Looking to the future, we can expect regulations to change. On the basis of current data, there is going to be a shortage of workers, and not only in high-demand sectors. Attempts will be made to regulate this process and working longer will be encouraged.

Organisations which already pay attention to developing good relations with older employees, and which take pro-active steps to find solutions and formulas along with their employees, are already ahead of the field. They can take the necessary time for this awareness-raising process, and together with the shop floor generate suitable solutions for the company that will be qualitatively better than hastily thought-up measures imposed from above.

Our specific line of approach encourages companies to develop age-conscious HR policies so that the company and its workers are prepared for the future. This win-win situation has to be created together with the parties involved. Our case studies show that after an awareness-raising stage organisations, do indeed go in search of possibilities to give shape to age-conscious HR policies within their organisations.

Bibliography

Argyris, C. & Schön, D.A. (1978). *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Corthouts, F., Faassen, T., Ruijters, W. & Verleg, J. (1991). *De wakkere organisatie. Scoren met kwaliteit* [The aware organisation: scoring with quality]. Schiedam: Scriptum.

De Weerdt, S. (2003). *Identiteitsleren als relationeel proces. Professionele ontwikkeling in de organisatiekunde* [Identity learning as a relational process. Professional development in the theory of organisations]. Thesis text. Promotors: R. Bouwen & F. Corthouts. Diepenbeek: Uitgeverij LUC.

Dixon, N.M. (1999). The Organizational Learning Cycle, How we can learn collectively. Aldershot: Gower.

Friedlander, F. (1983). 'Patterns of Individual and Organizational Learning', in: Srivastava, Suresh & Associates, *The Executive Mind, New Insights on Managerial Thought and Action*, p.192-220. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Goyvaerts, K. (2004). 'Vlucht SN 50-plus naar Benidorm, klaar voor vertrek', Over.werk. Tijdschrift van het Steunpunt WAV, jrg. 14, nr.3, p. 9-17.

Gratton, L. (2000). Living Strategy. Putting people at the Heart of Corporate Purpose. London: Prentice-Hall.

Hoge Raad van Werkgelegenheid (2004). *Verslag 2004* [2004 report]. Brussels. Website: www.meta.fgov.be.

Ilmarinen, J. (1999). Ageing workers and the European Union – status and promotion of work ability, employability and employment. Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Helsinki.

Lewin, K. (1951). *Field Theory in Social Science*, Harper and Row, New York.

Martens, H. (1997). *Optimalisatie van het personeelsbeleid in de Belgische belastingadministratie: een actie-onderzoek* [Optimisation of personnel policy in the Belgian tax administration: an action research]. Tilburg: University Press.

Martens, H., Vandenberk, A., Deweerdt, S., (2004). 'Werken en 50-plussers: belevingen en inzetbaarheid' [Work and the over-50s: perceptions and employability]. In Heeren, J., Milis, K. (ed.), *Staten-Generaal van de Limburgse Werkgelegenheid*, p.211-232. Tielt: Lannoo-Campus.

Nonaka, I., Takeuchi, H. (1995). The Knowledge Creating Company: How Japanese companies create the dynamics of innovation. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Polanyi, M. (1967). *The Tacit Dimension*. New York, Anchor.

Probst, G., & Büchel, B. (1997). *Organizational Learning.* London: Prentice Hall.

Schein, E.H. (1987). Process Consultation. Volume I. Its Role in Organization Development. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Schein, E.H. (1999). Process Consultation Revisited. Building the Helping Relationship. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Schein, E.H. (2003a). 'Taking Culture Seriously in Organization Development: A New Role for OD?' *MIT Sloan Working Paper, 4287*, 3, 1-21.

Schein, E.H. (2003b). DEC is Dead, Long Live DEC. Lessons on Innovation, Technology, and the Business Gene. The Lasting Legacy of Digital Equipment Corporation. San Francisco: Berret-Koehler.

Sels, L., De Visch, J., Albertijn, M. (2002). *Naar een recht op loopbaanbegeleiding* [Towards careers guidance as a right]*.* Careers Guidance Taskforce. Koning Boudewijn Stichting Report.

SERV (2001). *Oud maar niet out! Handleiding voor een leeftijdsbewust personeelsbeleid* [Old but not out! Manual for age-conscious human resources policies]*.*

Swieringa, J. & Wierdsma, A.F.M. (1991). *Op weg naar een lerende organisatie. Over leren en opleiden van organisaties* [On the way to a learning organisation. On learning and training organisations]*.* Herent: Wolters, Noordhoff Management.

Wissema, J.G., Messer, H.M. & Wijers, G.J. (1991). *Angst voor veranderen? Een Mythe* [Fear of change? A myth]. Assen: Van Gorcum.