

AN ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT APPROACH TOWARDS AGE DIVERSITY PRACTICES IN BELGIAN ORGANIZATIONS

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Belgium is characterized by a very low employment level of older employees. This problem is created by the different stakeholders over a period of 35 years. We clarify our main research objectives and questions. Next we explain our theoretical framework: a “generative theory” that generates actions and opportunities beyond merely explaining and predicting. The framework, which is built around the “practice” concept, is mainly intended to lead to an open discussion concerning age-related problems and possible HR solutions. We then discuss our research and intervention methodology—organization development/process consultation—which we used in two in-company research projects. These projects are aimed at the pro-active discovery of new practices that encourage workers to work longer, more efficiently, and more enthusiastically. We describe the different steps in the two projects as well as their results. We end with conclusions and discussions and shed light on practical and theoretical implications.

Problem Statement and Research Objectives

Low Employment Level of Older Workforce in Belgium

The overall employment rate is very low in Belgium (59.6%). The employment rate is defined as the active working age population (number of people) as a percentage of the population (net employment rate) aged 20–64 (National Action Plan

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for Employment, 2003). The average employment rate within the EU is estimated at 64.2%. In Finland and in Denmark we respectively see rates of 69% and 76% (Hoge Raad van Werkgelegenheid, 2004).

In addition, the employment rate in Belgium has only improved by 2.6% between 1997 and 2002, compared to an increase of 4% in the EU. Given that the Lisbon Strategy aims for a European employment rate of 70% by 2010, Belgium must put forth a serious effort in order to meet this goal. One of the greatest challenges is the low employment rate of the older workforce (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003). Only one out of four people between the ages of 55 and 64 is employed, i.e., an extremely low rate of 25.7%. This is 14.1% lower than the European average.

If we consider the demographic evolution, we witness a broadening at the top of the population pyramid while the base is narrowing. The big "baby boom generation" (born between 1950 and 1965) will soon be entitled to retirement pensions. At the same time, the group of people younger than 20 will decrease from 25% of the population in 1990 to 20% in 2010. This decrease in the active population may result in worker shortages and in slower economic growth. Since the total population will increase, the increase in income per head of the population will be stalled (Hoge Raad van Werkgelegenheid, 2004).

The low employment rate of the older workforce can be ascribed to a certain extent to the systematic reduction of the factual pensionable age in Belgium since the end of World War II. The OESO estimated that the actual 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. This is below the statutory pensionable age of 65. In the last 50 years, the introduction of social welfare legislation has led to a ten-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 work years and higher life expectancy. People live longer, and in some cases the post-active years outlast the active years. In sum, we can say that in general the active period is too short (21–58: +/-37 years) and the inactive period is too long (0–21 and 58–78 +/-41 years) (Martens, 2004).

Our social security system and pension plans cannot carry the burden of such a discrepancy between the active and post-active periods. This discrepancy between economic independence and economic dependence is getting more and more problematic. Today, 2.5 workers are employed per pensioner. In 2050 the ratio will amount to 1.45 to one. This means fewer social contributions for the benefit of pensioners and a dramatic fall of 42% in pensions (simple extrapolation) (Nationaal Instituut voor de Statistiek) (Martens, Vandenberg en De Weerd, 2004; Martens, 2004).

In some member states of the EU, a call for reforms has led to the development of strategies to employ more elderly people for a longer time (e.g., Jepsen, Foden, & Hutsebaut, 2002, 2003). In Belgium, many claim that similar measures ought to be taken, but an encompassing strategy is virtually nonexistent. Moreover, two contradictory forces are at work. There is the need to work longer, but at the same

time, many still cling to the attractive early retirement programs. In order to understand the Belgian situation better, it is necessary to get an insight into the history of this sensitive issue. The stakeholders involved (employees, government, unions, employers, and HR people) have created and preserved this precarious situation of low employment rates and early retirement by protecting their own interests.

Understanding the Belgian Situation: Low Employment Level of Older Workforce as “Co-Created” Problem

Since the 1970s the government fostered early retirement programs without asking anything from the retirees in exchange. At the end of the 1970s, the dark period of “stagflation” (the combination of high inflation and increasing unemployment), there were more young people willing to enter the workplace than there were elderly workers leaving the company. The unfavorable demographic pressure was strong, and few young people actually found a job (Het Belgisch Werkgelegenheidsbeleid, 2001). Confronted with the high number of young people unemployed, the government encouraged elderly employees to opt for early retirement. Priority was given to the younger generation. The emphasis lay on “equal opportunities for young people.” The elderly were comforted with the idea that “the time had come to enjoy the fruits of labor.” This rhetoric, at its inception only a highly pragmatic one, has become a belief and an imperative over the years. Meanwhile, it has acquired legal status and has achieved a household name, “early retirement.”

In the case of a lay-off, early retirement gives elderly employees the opportunity to receive supplementary financial compensation from the employer in addition to the commonplace unemployment benefit. This right to get a supplementary compensation is rooted in the collective employment contract (CAO) that is drawn up by employers (or their deputies) and the unions. This settlement stimulates elderly employees to leave the job market between the ages of 55 and 60, depending on the type of agreement reached in a sector or company (Wegwijs in het conventioneel brugpensioen, 2003).

Early retirement is a system that is co-created by government, employers, and unions. The government creates the high unemployment benefits of the elderly in such circumstances (reaching up to an average of 50 or 60% of the former income) against the backdrop of giving opportunities to young people, thus indulging in high public spending. The company moves its elderly employees into unemployment and provides the supplementary benefits that offset the difference between former income and the dole. According to this strategy, elderly employees that are pensioned-off receive 75% of their former income provided that they do not work anymore. Employers and their HR services have successfully brought the imperative of “giving opportunities to young people” to their employees (and have made their account as well). Early retirement saves money and is an elegant alternative to unpopular lay-offs instead of curtailments. Elderly employees tend to be more expensive than young starters. One elderly middle manager or white-collar worker

costs employers as much as 1.5 to 1.8 younger workers. This comparison does not hold true for blue collar workers. The rhetoric of “giving opportunities to young people” was prevalent throughout the difficult 1980s and 1990s when reorganizations were desired. Early retirement practices were, in fact, pursued by employers and HR departments to ensure a cost efficient company with a higher productivity per hour by pensioning off elderly employees through “easy and elegant solutions.”

At this moment, the diagnosis has been made. Various reports recognize the problem (OESO, NAP, Strategy of Lisbon, Pact of Vilvoorde, Hoge Raad van Werkgelegenheid, 2004). We cannot mortgage our future and our children’s future for the temporary convenience of the present. We must act today in order to preserve tomorrow. Many talk about these problems but do not practise what they preach. Self-interest prevents all parties involved from taking measures.

Within this inconsistent framework provided by the government, which encourages early retirement and at the same time calls for people to continue working longer, we propose to initiate and develop age-related HR policies in companies.

In what follows, we discuss the aims of our European Social Fund (ESF)¹ project, and we focus on our research questions. The theoretical framework we use to organize and support age-related HR management will be explained as well.

Research Objectives and Questions: Towards Age-Related Human Resources Policies

Within the ESF framework we started the “Silver Instruments and Processes” project. The aim of this project is to start and develop age-related HR management within companies. Age-related Human Resource policy is focused on developing, using, and maintaining the competencies, knowledge, and experience of all employees in all age-groups while recognizing various age-related possibilities and needs (Langendoen, 1998).

The research question can be summed up as follows: *How can we, against the backdrop of an impeding legislative and judicial framework, create an “age friendly” organization in which young and old “enrich” each other encourage each other so that they all are motivated to work longer?* We explicitly change the focus from emphasis on elderly workers to emphasis on all age-groups because we believe that developing age-friendly practices is above all a relational challenge *between* people: enthusiasm and motivation are, essentially, relational phenomena. A second reason for the shift in focus is that focusing on elderly workers only would be a symptomatic short-term solution instead of a more systemic long-term approach: all workers get older.

More concretely, we can formulate our research question as How can we develop a dynamism which facilitates and encourages the different actors within the company—employees, HR, management, and unions—to invent and experiment proactively with age-friendly HR management so that they can quickly and accurately respond once the legislative and judicial frameworks are reshaped? *We explicitly mention employees, HR, management, and unions because they are the key*

groups that make the organization system and culture. Together with the government they co-created the problem at hand (see section titled Three Aspects of Professional Functioning—Aspirations, Competencies, and Self-Efficacy below). We believe that a possible co-created solution can only come from initiating high quality dialogue among the different stakeholders.

These questions evoke other specific or subquestions.

- How can we come to a shared vision concerning age-friendly management?
- How can we achieve a positive change in mindset with respect to working longer and working differently?
- Which HRM conditions and guidelines can we create, such as assisted career planning?
- How can we reach and safeguard a balance between the “hard” components, such as strategy, systems and structures on the one hand, and “softer” components such as leadership style, negotiation and decision-making on the other hand, in which we ask ourselves the following questions: which (HR)strategies, systems, and structures support an age-friendly organization process? Or: How can management support an age-friendly policy?
- How can we—starting from the assumption that working longer also implies life-long learning—generate a process in which all members of the organisation exchange their experiences, share their implicit knowledge and make knowledge explicit in a mutually beneficial way? How can we encourage people to learn from each other and to put that knowledge into practice within the organization?

The most important goal of this ESF project is to perform organizational development projects. These projects lead to the invention and development of an age-friendly organization process and HR management within organizations. Emphasis lies on the development of new practices, new habits, and customs within the organization. Bearing in mind the rapidly changing social and legal context (we expect the government to lay down new regulations in order to have people working longer); we want to search proactively with all actors within the organization for new alternatives and possibilities that are acceptable and desirable for everyone. Age-related HR policies can resolve the stated problems to some extent by stimulating work enthusiasm and professional development throughout an individual’s entire career. But in parallel the government has the duty to form a legislative framework that stimulates organizations to start the learning journey towards an age-friendly organization.

Before we highlight our working method and principles with the example of two concrete research projects, we first explain the research framework, which helps us to give meaning to age-related organization and HR management.

Theoretical Framework

We start from the assumption that if the financial and legal frameworks foster such ambitions, people are willing to work longer provided that their aspirations and competencies are in sync and if their motivation and self-confidence make it

possible to continuously learn, realize their dreams, and reach their goals. In other words, age-friendly organizing means the development of new practices that stimulate the integration of aspirations, competencies, and self-efficacy of workers.

In order to illustrate and support the creation and the process of such practices, we first investigate the meaning of “practice” as a concept. Based on Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002: 38), Bouwen (2001: 2), and Orlikowski (2002: 256) we describe “practice” as a whole range of activities (1) in which people engage in a certain way, i.e., according to certain patterns, (2) in which different actors are involved, who interact with each other and participate from their perspective or frame of reference. Here, people shape practice and practice shapes people. Thus, an “organization” is described as “an assembly of practices, which may change and evolve in time” (Bouwen, 2001: 2) and which continuously reproduce the organization (Orlikowski, 2002: 256).

Our framework consists of three interrelated aspects: three dimensions of practice (content, process, and meaning), three aspects of professional functioning (aspirations, competencies and self-efficacy) and four ways to organize age-related management. We will now look at these three dimensions in detail.

Three Dimensions of a “Practice”: Content, Process, and Meaning

The description of “practice” involves three dimensions: content, process, and meaning (inspired by Pettigrew, 1985, 1987, 1990, 1997). A “practice” can always be inquired into and documented on the basis of these dimensions.

Content (What?). “Practices” have a content: there is something happening; people are doing things together. Content interventions are done from an expert model of HR-management and consulting. This “content” focus dominates most of the HR literature. Schein (1999), however, argues that well constructed HR systems are not necessarily workable in a concrete context, since people may not feel enough ownership over them.

Process (with Whom? How?). The process deals with “how” people cope with the content (Schein, 1987, 1999). How people do things together, and the way they try to achieve these things is the process. More specifically, we pay attention to relational and interpersonal processes. Who is involved and who is not? Which interactions determine the continuous reproduction and adaptation of practices? Who treats whom and in what way? Interventions upon this process dimension are called process interventions (process model).

Meaning (Why? What’s the Point?). Which frames of reference do people use in order to make sense of practices? People do things together, in a particular fashion, and understand meaning from their own perspectives. Since different actors are involved in the development of practices, these practices have not one meaning,

but multiple meanings, depending on who is doing the seeing, talking, and acting (Lave, 1993; De Boer, 1997; Orlikowski, 2002).

Content, process, and meaning are interlocked and should always be assessed in relation to each other. A certain instrument (content) may receive various, possibly conflicting, meanings since it is viewed from different perspectives by different people, e.g., because there was a lack of attention on the shared development of a collective framework of reference during the interactive creation of practices (process). If you change the approach, you automatically change the choice of instruments to be used (content) as well as the way people make sense of practices (meaning making).

Essentially, we see OD as changing practices. An OD project creates practices that are aimed at redefining or reconsidering “old” practices and/or setting up totally new practices. Through this reconsideration the dimensions of content, process, and/or meaning of practice can be contemplated. The OD project is only one of the many projects performed by the organization. In order to get a clear understanding of an OD project, background, and all other projects will have to be taken into account (Pettigrew, 1990).

Armed with these three dimensions/questions we will, always together with the actors involved, investigate to what extent the practices appeal to the aspirations, competencies, and self-efficacy of people. Similarly, we will look for new practices that pay attention to all three dimensions of practice (versus the one-sided focus on the content dimension of practice).

Three Aspects of Professional Functioning—Aspirations, Competencies, and Self-Efficacy

We presuppose that HR practices idealistically aim at optimizing the professional functioning of people. The effectiveness of these practices hinges on the attention that is simultaneously paid to the three practice dimensions mentioned above. Furthermore, we see optimal professional functioning as an interplay between three other dimensions: aspirations, competencies, and self-efficacy. Each professional worker idealistically tries to establish a perfect harmony between aspirations, competences, and self-efficacy in order to make professional dreams come true and to learn continuously. We assume that if these hopes are fulfilled, people will be prepared to work longer.

Aspirations. Each professional project starts with the question: Where do I want to go? A clear understanding of one’s aspirations marks the first step in the development of one’s professional project because in the long run “people cannot do the things they do not want to do” (Sels et al., 2002: 28). These aspirations surpass the boundaries of professional life as they also apply to the context of the family. Questions are: Who am I? Where do I want to stand? Investigating ones learning styles (Kolb, 1984), career anchors (Schein, 1985) and personality helps to answer these

questions. Clear aspirations contribute to “knowing why”: “People cannot do the things they can’t make sense of and they don’t see the value of” (Sels et al., 2002: 28).

Competencies. Understanding one’s competencies or “knowing how” implies an assessment of one’s capabilities and an analysis of the nature and degree of one’s professional experience. Through experience variation, stimulated by a continuous assessment of competencies and capacities and an analysis of one’s professional experience, people can avoid the pitfall of having too strong of an experience concentration or experience fragmentation (Thijssen, 1996). Experience concentration or experience fragmentation is defined as narrowing experience during a career by strong specialisation with not enough variation. This can be positive: after a while one can do things very quickly as a routine-activity. But the negative consequence of experience concentration is that people aren’t enough “on the move”: their employability decreases dramatically. Sound competency management should find a harmony between individual capabilities and organizational competence desires.

Self-Efficacy. Finding the right balance between aspirations and competencies is a necessary condition for achieving confidence as a professional. That’s what Bandura (1997) calls “self-efficacy”: the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments.

Self-confidence is an important factor when making professional choices: change requires courage. Learning, seen as an expansion of one’s competencies, implies that people are willing to keep the gates open, to go beyond their own “comfort zone,” to broaden their horizons, and to never close off any options. The concept of “resilience” (O’Leary, 1998) also comes close: the individual strength to cope with discomforting situations.

These three dimensions—aspirations, competencies, and self-efficacy—are interlocked. The willingness to learn and keep on learning implies courage, and recognizing one’s aspirations demands some courage as well. Each one of these three aspects of professional functioning appeals to a specific learning level. Competence management is related to the learning of “know how.” Learning to “aspire” and to be “self-efficient” relate to deeper layers of the learning process (De Weerd, 2003), which can find a place within processes of facilitated career planning and HR practices that promote life-long learning (e.g., Lambrechts et al., 2002).

Four Ways to Create Age-Friendly Organizing

In order to achieve integration between aspirations, competencies, and self-efficacy, age-related practices can use certain instruments. We differentiate between four clusters of instruments that have their proper place within age-related HR practices and to which professionals can appeal during their careers. We distinguish between the cluster of legal and financial instruments that are provided for

by the government (see cluster 1). The three other clusters are based on the distinction made by Bolhuis and Simons (1999) between facilitated learning processes outside the workplace, which are different from the actual work in terms of time and place (see cluster 2), the semi-formal facilitated learning processes at work (see cluster 3), and the spontaneous learning processes at work through informal and learning stimulating work methods (see cluster 4). These instruments are summed up in Table 1. We do not expand on them; that would lead us too far.

In sum, we state that depending on the perspective one takes (employer, employee, HR, or labor union; difference in hierarchical level and/or functional department), one can give other meanings of the discussed dimensions to practice. By inquiring into the narratives, the experiences and feelings, of the diverse actors involved from all “corners and layers” of the organization, we can get a differentiated, “full” and panoramic image of practices. We can bring those diverse perspectives, thus diverse meanings, in conversation with the aim to come to sufficient “shared understanding” to keep the conversation going. Hence, “old” practices can be reframed and/or new ones can be developed.

The Framework as a Generative Theory

This framework allows further development of theory concerning practices of age-friendly HR management, upon which further research can be built. It is our aim to make this model work in a generative way. In a generative way means that we want to build a “generative theory”: a theory that generates actions and opportunities beyond merely explaining and predicting (Bouwen, 2003: 21). The framework is mainly intended to open the conversation concerning age-related problems and possible HR solutions.

The framework also makes it possible to inquire into several areas in both literature and practice. What is the dominant emphasis in practice—the “What,” “How,” and/or “Why”? What is the effect of this dominant focus upon age-friendly organizing? What can we do in order to avoid possibly undesirable effects and to transform these into desirable effects? In this way, we can get in contact with the involved actors to find out which focus-learning issues should get more attention.

It is a “working model” that invites us to converse regarding age-related practices as well as to intervene in them. Let us show you an example of how the model works. We found that organizations that promote their “best practices” predominantly emphasize the content, providing extensive information on “What” and its instruments; whereas methods and multiple meanings are often obscured or blurred. We are well aware of the fact that content is easier to talk about. But this overemphasis also betrays a rather top-down way to deal with age-related HR management. It should be noted that companies convey an interest in the “How” and “Why” without bringing this aspect into the open. This can account partly for the fact that organizations hardly learn from each other in terms of “How” and “Why.”

When we apply the model to literature and organization practice, it becomes clear that the common meaning of “best practices,” namely the idea that such prac-

Table 1
Four Clusters of Possibilities to Create Age-Related Management

1. Cluster formal possibilities offered by the government to the organization; mainly legal and financial instruments.

- Time credit, part-time, early retirement, runways
- Flex time
- Pension plans, duo jobs, detachment
- Policy concerning absenteeism
- Restriction of workload
- Change in function, outplacement, telecommuting
- Ergonomic measures
- Cafeteria plan for the end of the career

2. Cluster formal assistance tools: independent upon the actual work in terms of time and space.

- Age-friendly internal and external application procedures
- Reward system that supports age-related management
- Competence management
- Education and training
- Improving mobility and estimating people's potential
- Developing career planning
- Function differentiation and reorientation, extended job descriptions, specialized functions
- Stress prevention
- Workshops centering around one's own employability
- Evaluation of the intellectual and practical value of different functions
- Discussing demotion
- Mentor trainings

3. Cluster semi-formal assistance tools: take place within the context of work.

- Work meetings or councils
- Transfer of knowledge, teambuilding, learning groups, learning through experience
- Employee council—union representation
- Information channels, knowledge pools
- Mentor-coach and godfather formulas
- Making implicit knowledge between individuals (young-old) and groups explicit
- Development of vision concerning age-friendly management and dealing with diversity

4. Cluster informal, constructive working methods.

Extended job description

- Specific projects
 - Specialized functions
 - Rotary teams
 - Duo jobs
 - Interim jobs
 - Inplacement
-

tices could be transferred and applied anywhere as if they were static objects, is a false one. Lave (1993) and Orlikowski (2002) teach us that practices are always situated within a specific context and thus have multiple meanings. Practices need adaptation when applied to different contexts. ‘Best practices’ in company A may be ‘worst practices’ in company B when introduced and implemented without taking into account the different perspectives of the actors involved. Moreover, it strikes us that the instruments from clusters 3 and 4, such as making implicit knowledge explicit (transfer of knowledge), team learning, learning through experience...rarely occur in practice. It should be stressed, however, that both experience and literature tell us that these more relational aspects can make a great difference, motivating people throughout their entire careers. These instruments are more relational approaches in the long term than the dominant quick fix, individual *ad hoc* solutions. In what follows, we describe our working method. We will illustrate our approach by means of two research projects, which we introduce within the framework of our ESF “Silver Instruments and Processes” research.

Research and Intervention Methodology: Organization Development (OD)—Process Consultation

Our methodology consists of OD from a “Process Consultation” point of view. We strongly believe that “how” and “with whom” new practices are developed, are of vital importance within age-friendly HR management.

We are inspired by the work of Edgar Allen Schein on “process consultation” in groups and organizations (Schein, 1987, 1999). We stress “process” because we feel that *the way things are done* are as important, or even more important, than *what is actually done*. This ‘How?’ often brings the message across more accurately than the content of our words do. Still, the process is something we are seldom familiar with. Through lack of specific education and training we often fall short when discerning and developing such processes in order to realise our goals (Schein, 1999). This is the gap that Process Consultants try to fill. As OD practitioners, together with all actors involved, we try to find the best way to shape age-friendly HR management, and we support this process.

Before we present our specific projects, we must first clearly define the principles of our OD approach since they form the backbone of our facilitation and investigation efforts.

Principles of Intervention

The core of these principles consists of developing tailor-made processes together with the actors involved to achieve a “win-win” situation (e.g., Gerrichhauzen, Kampermann, & Kluytmans, 1996; Martens, 1997). In Table 2 we sum up these principles.

Mobilizing and using energy through facilitation and training activities in order to move to an age-friendly organizing process and HR management.

Table 2
Principles of Intervention

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- Mobilizing and using energy
 - Fostering co-authorship and commitment
 - Creating a common ground
 - Facilitating conversation and dialogue
 - Creating shared responsibility
 - Action oriented and participatory research
 - Anchoring the innovative practices in the organization
 - Graduality
-

Fostering co-authorship and commitment by involving as many parties in the process as possible, through exchanging and conversing about personal experiences, feelings, expectancies, and visions concerning age-related HR management.

Creating a common ground by means of working toward a shared vision concerning the actual and desired situation with respect to age-friendly HR management.

Facilitating conversation and dialogue. We bring all parties involved (management, HR management, unions, employees) into the conversation concerning experiences, expectancies, visions, or worries and we do this with a special focus on creating sufficient shared understanding and mutual respect for the concerns and identities of all the actors involved. The driver of the OD process is, thus, a constructive and continuous dialogue between all parties involved. One of our core tasks as OD practitioners is to facilitate and document this dialogue from which honourable agreements and learning conclusions can be drawn.

Creating shared responsibility. All parties have to take up their own responsibility within the OD process: HRM, line management, unions, employees and we, process consultants. Thus, everyone is regarded as the co-owner of the project. The feeling of being an important actor, whom people listen to and respect, is vital in the OD process.

Action oriented and participatory research. We do research in an organization in the sense that we co-think and co-initiate and facilitate an OD process so that the gathered knowledge is beneficial to the company as well as to research in general. Together with the actors involved we search and inquire into the question: "What could age-friendly organizing mean for each of us from our specific perspectives?" We do not present ourselves as content experts who impose some best practice as a change process. However, a best practice may still be useful as a source of inspiration when creating a tailor-made process.

Anchoring the innovative practices in the organization. New agreements and regulations need to be put into practice and translated into procedures, structures and systems supporting age-related HR management.

Graduality. We work step by step: each careful step is planned, executed, evaluated and fine-tuned with and by all actors involved. The change project is not static

or immutable but starts from a shared vision and a shared end result. Our aim is to develop practices that are used by the company but that can also be used by other companies as a source of inspiration. In that way, we try to develop a dynamic that, in the end, surpasses the results found in the researched companies.

Now we shall apply these principles to the research projects.

Research and Intervention Projects

In this section we describe the research projects in two organizations and discuss the provisional results.

Borealis. Borealis, producer of plastic solutions, is a multinational corporation with Scandinavian roots. Its headquarters are in Denmark. In Belgium, Borealis has a workforce of 880 employees divided over its four branches.²

After conversations with the HR managers of the different branches we have started with six focus groups from the four branches. These groups are viewed as a first orientation—and consciousness-raising action. Here, the experiences, feelings, and proposals of the actors, concerning an age-related HR management, are charted so that we know what these individuals think and feel. Afterwards, we used this input to take a following step in the direction of concrete actions. At each meeting, 45 collaborators per focus group were invited, representing a cross-section of different levels and functions. Two-thirds of the invited people took part in the workshop. We organized the focus groups around three main questions:

- What are the factors that make you work enthusiastically and what would motivate you to work longer?
- Which factors inhibit you from working longer?
- What does the organisation have to do so that you will consider working longer? And what could you do?

The mix of diverse functions and layers in the focus groups is important in order to establish enough common ground within the organization to establish future initiatives.

The next step will be taken in the latter part of the year, one afternoon during which we shall reconvene with management to report on results of the focus groups and to see what we can do in the future. In addition, we shall plan a day with the union representatives, the HR managers and some people from the employee's council of every branch (an average of about 25 people) so that we can report on the focus groups and decide upon the further development of the process. We think that this will result in some workshops per branch around one or more of the following topics: timesaving formulas, mentoring and transfer of knowledge, flexitime and skill pooling for middle managers. These groups—a mix of management, unions, and employees—will meet four or five times in the course of the next year. Again, we underline the importance of the mix in the groups since all actors should

be involved from the very beginning. That way the chance of creating a strong and broad ground for future actions is much greater. The “cooperation forum,” a cooperative body that operates at the different locations and in which ten people from the individual employee councils come together, surveys the activities of the groups. In that way, the projects are also integrated within the already existent cooperative body. The representatives of the employee councils are thus invited to become co-owners of the projects and play an important “bridging role” toward people from their own branches; they give feedback and therefore ensure that the projects find access to a large group of people within the company. The chance that the project will be embodied by an ever-broadening group of people is higher this way. The aimed result of the workgroups is twofold. First, the groups try to develop and experiment with concrete opportunities to come to an age-friendly HR management. We facilitate the process according to the principles described above. Secondly, we try to bring about a change in the organizational mindset concerning the need to work longer and thus differently. After these workgroups have ended their efforts and made their final conclusions, we organize a day where they can present their projects to a broad audience that hopefully leads to future initiatives.

In the next project, the city council of Hasselt, we also used focus groups but in a slightly different approach that fits the local context better.

City Council Hasselt. The city of Hasselt is an organization of more than 800 employees, divided over various departments and services such as population, culture, tourism, finance, and welfare. The city of Hasselt serves the local community, in which every citizen (80,000 in total) can equally request local services.³

The development of this project occurs in collaboration with the organization adviser of the city council of Hasselt and the work group WAP (Workgroup Attention Personnel), which pays attention to needs of the employees. This is an already existent body that is composed of representatives from different layers, services, and functions of the city council. They have already undertaken actions concerning motivation and staff training in the past. A recent example is the “exchange program” which gives people the opportunity to exchange their jobs for a certain period of time, a very popular measure indeed. We presented our proposals to these people and invited them to present their stories and views. People were enthusiastic and cooperative. We were asked to find a suitable way to launch the project. We introduced the focus-group methodology in the WAP group and proposed to use this methodology in the larger group. We also asked whether there was room for improvement. After some minor re-formulations of the questions, the method was accepted for the larger group for a day-long workshop facilitated by us and organized around the same questions as in the focus groups at Borealis.

The WAP coordinates the project together with us and has shown much initiative within the city council. Also management and the head of personnel affairs are involved in the process. The organization adviser presents the project as a WAP initiative that counts on support and assistance from the university, which gives us indispensable political backing. Meanwhile the “lunch-workshop” proved to be a

success. Young and old joined in, the head of administrative affairs took part and the press was present as well. The aim of the workshop is twofold. Firstly, we want to chart the experiences, ideas, and proposals in regard to working longer, happily and efficiently within the city of Hasselt. Secondly, we will be provided with some advice concerning the scope for improvement with which we can proceed in the next stage toward concrete action.

We planned a second session three weeks after the “lunch-workshop” with the same group, during which the results of the discussions in the three groups were translated into action proposals, which illustrates well the importance of the proposals.

The WAP will now proceed with these results, which marks the next step in the process. Two questions are asked: Which actions can be linked, and do we already see concrete actions that can result from the workshop and its follow-up? An important action concerned the “negative” image of job rotation. The WAP organized a brainstorm session, facilitated by us, around the conditions needed to reframe and introduce job rotation positively and around the necessary support from the City Council. Two project groups were installed for implementation.

Results of the Focus Groups at Borealis and Hasselt City Council. In this section we will look at the main results from the focus groups at Borealis and Hasselt city council for all the three questions.

What Are the Factors That Make You Work Enthusiastically and What Would Motivate You to Work for Longer? The role of the immediate superior often turns out to be crucial. He needs to create the conditions for the employee to want and be able to remain mobile during his entire career. Values such as respect, trust, and esteem are mentioned again and again as being decisive in keeping the “desire to work” at a high level. The superior can create these conditions by adopting a style of leadership characterized by coaching, stimulating, and facilitating rather than controlling and limiting. Higher management will, of course, need to support this leadership style. Focus groups state that receiving training and chances to learn during the course of one’s whole career increase enjoyment at work and will have a positive influence on their choice to keep working for longer. But we should not be too extreme. For this reason, it is also very important to bring managers’ and employees’ mutual expectations into line with each other. This can be done, for example, by means of job function and career discussions.

Workers often emphasize the importance of a good atmosphere between colleagues, on top of the important role of their superiors. Giving and receiving respect and esteem also play a crucial role here. There has to be a good relationship between the “young” (beginners or inexperienced) and the “old” (professional or experienced), certainly in one’s own team. Accepting and appreciating age differences as a source of richness rather than of frictions seems to be an important factor in taking pleasure in continuing to work for longer.

Job content quality is often cited as a driving force behind working for longer with enjoyment: variety, being able to see the meaningfulness of one’s job in the

larger scheme of things, experiencing success and seeing results, feeling sufficiently autonomous in one's job, or chances for job rotation.

Focus group members also frequently spoke of the value of keeping the right balance between work and private life. Part-time work, flexible hours, among other things are mentioned as possible ways to encourage people to continue working longer. Sabbaticals and being able to organize how you use your time at work are also often mentioned in this context.

Over 45s also state that there needs to be a big enough difference in financial terms between working and not working if they are to go on working. This is not the case at this time. Working longer is sometimes purely a financial necessity: "I don't have any choice." Many focus group participants wanted a clear assurance that they were not going to end up in a stricter pension scheme in the near future. If the management gives such a guarantee, then it is worth considering working for longer.

Which Factors Discourage You from Working Longer? Here there is less to say. Often this has to do with the absence of the stimulating factors that we have identified above.

Most of all, bad relations with superiors and colleagues are cited as obstacles to continued working. We hear expressions such as "no respect," "undervalued," "marginalized," etc.

The pattern of expectations and social pressures from friends, family, acquaintances, and colleagues inside and outside your company are often mentioned as the factor discouraging continued working: "It's time to take advantage," "I'm the only one in my street who is still working," "You're crazy to go on working; why would you want to do that?," "Give younger people a chance," among others.

Many people say that they simply want to enjoy themselves "while we still can; while we're still healthy; we've worked hard enough." Uncertain future prospects also play a decisive role. People say that they want to profit from the "favorable" scheme "now," because "soon I won't be able to any more."

Participants also say that the physical and psychosocial burdens of their job are a factor that makes them decide not to continue working: too fast, too much stress, twenty-four-hour system (working in teams), the work is physically too demanding to do it for long. Overly rapid changes and excessive or insufficient demands (daily grind) are seen as being destructive. Traffic jams are also a source of discontent for those who have to go to work by car. Just as with the encouraging factors, it is a combination of all the foregoing that leads people not to want to go on working, and in fact to stop as soon as possible.

What Does Your Organization Have to Do So That You Will Consider Working for Longer? And What Could You Do? The focus groups make it clear that making it possible to discuss this sensitive issue is a good thing in itself. People understand the necessity of working longer more than is traditionally believed. This is certainly true when they are confronted with some crystal-clear figures incontrovertibly showing this to be a necessity.

They expect the employer, the top management and their superiors to take a clear position—namely that they want to retain older employees for longer—and to have a clear vision for the future that takes into account people’s short—and long-term concerns.

What is striking during the focus group sessions is that hardly anyone says anything about the degree of responsibility that an employee takes for his own career development. Nevertheless, we believe that the employees are themselves responsible for searching out and grasping learning opportunities.

Career discussions between the immediate superior and the employee are often mentioned as a significant step towards improvement. Managers and employees could exchange expectations, wishes, and concerns during such discussions, which would take place at regular times, in order to come to concrete agreements. In this way one can work to achieve a balance between, on the one hand, the employee’s needs, and on the other, the needs of the company. Training and educational requirements could also be discussed at such meetings, or one could deal with possible job variation and rotation. Such meetings would at the same time make it possible to monitor and direct the employee’s development. Participants also expect their organization to create sufficient opportunities for employees to organise their work in accordance with the stage of their career they are at: 60%, 80%, half-time working, job-sharing, periods of working a lot more or less, etc. Both older employees and those in their 30s can make use of such possibilities.

We also hear that the company needs to make efforts to create an innovative evaluation and remuneration policy, because “working longer” and “getting older” are often seen in a negative light these days. Even though there are certainly success stories, they are insufficiently publicized.

Encouraging home working is seen as a possible way to lessen traffic jam misery. Home working is not possible with all jobs, but a lot more could be done if people were willing to think creatively and innovatively, even for a few days a week.

Notice that we held focus groups in both a profit—and a non-profit organization, which gives us interesting material for comparison. We are confronted by two different situations. Those employed by the city of Hasselt work until the age of 65. If you decide to retire at the age of 60, you will receive a lower pension. Moreover, this practice has only become commonplace during the last five or ten years and is therefore fairly new. At Borealis, the successive reorganizations of the last 15 years (with early retirement from the age of 52) have resulted in an average employee age of 50 years.

It is surprising that the reasons for working longer and more enthusiastically in both organizations are so similar.

Discussion and Conclusions: Practical and Theoretical Implications

In this last part of the article we want to give some practical and theoretical implications concerning age diversity practices. The OD approach and the focus

groups have lead to both practical and theoretical implications related to age diversity practices.

Implications for Practice

The practical implications transcend the boundaries/context of the own organization. Other factors have to be taken into account too, such as macro-economic developments, changing regulatory framework or individual differences. We focus in this document on the practical impact of the implementation of age diversity practices on the organization.

The essence of a sound age-related HR policy is that employees continue to learn and develop all through their careers, so that they remain constantly employable, with an undiminished "desire to work." To achieve this, we need to develop a strategic vision, a development-oriented HR infrastructure, and a skills policy with concrete action plans. Here HR needs to fulfill its four roles of strategic partner, infrastructure expert, motivation expert, and change agent (Ulrich, 1997).

Strategic Vision. If we want managers at all levels to take into account the development and the age of their staff, then the company first has to create a collective image of what this means, what the advantages are and how this will work. Employees expect management and HR to take a position here and to send a clear message: "Yes, we want older employees to work enthusiastically, effectively and efficiently for longer," and then design concrete action plans to achieve this. Age related initiatives need to be defined as positive phenomena for all parties involved. The companies vision towards age-related management should be enclosed in the overall company vision.

Designing a Development-Oriented HR Infrastructure

HR management has traditionally always been responsible for developing efficient systems and processes for staffing, training, assessing, rewarding, and promoting people in an organization. Taking care of a development-oriented HR infrastructure ensures that employees receive and can grasp opportunities to perform new tasks and assignments. It is a condition that stimulates "self-efficacy" and employability. Following aspects need to be taken in consideration: is there a well developed training management? Are there opportunities for intervision, team learning and consultations where co-operation between "young" and "old" can be discussed? Are there opportunities for mentoring and coaching? Are there several alternative career paths possible? Is there potential to extend or enrich tasks or contrary to work part-time, job sharing or reduced working hours?

Motivating and Stimulating Employees to Take Responsibility for Their Own Employability

Ensuring employability is partly the responsibility of each employee himself (see the importance of “self-efficacy,” “aspirations,” and “competencies”) and partly the responsibility of the business. Functioning and career discussions are crucial here. Employees should learn to reflect on their own job career and ask themselves: what would happen if my job were to disappear? What is my added value in this job function? What is my current market value? What can I do ‘in addition’? What other job opportunities do I still have?

The company can stimulate employees in this process by paying attention to the needs, expectations, worries, and complaints of employees and by responding in an appropriate way.

There needs to be a policy of encouragement, and a good mix of context conditions and rewards, so as to make use of the development opportunities that are created.

Stimulating Change. Implementing age-conscious policy requires a support base within the top management, HRM and middle management, as well as among front-line managers. Such a support base is something that is developed by acting together, and by entering into discussions about values and concrete possibilities and action plans: what are the opportunities and threats? What does the company lose if older workers leave early? And what does it gain? How can older employees contribute to making the company stronger? What is the general employee age structure as regards sections and types of employee?

Concrete facts and figures are the point of departure for discussions. By involving employees, and by asking them to experiment and to design their own systems and their own answers, one can design a customized approach to achieve the advantages of the age-conscious HR policy we have been looking at.

Age-Related HR: Creating Conditions in an Integrated Way. We believe that working to create conditions that will stimulate the “desire to work, mobility, and learning” of every employee at every stage of his career is best done in an integrated way. This means that all the relevant business variables (e.g., business objectives and management, vision, strategy, leadership, systems, culture, personnel, organization) that could encourage or inhibit working with enthusiasm for longer need to be included.

In conclusion, we can state that our specific approach will start up a process of change to arrive at new HR practices and other habits.

To do this, the management, employers, employees and trade unions need to modify their vision and values as regards working for longer. “Working for longer” and “more diversity in the workplace” needs to be regarded as positive phenomena.

Our specific approach encourages businesses to develop an age-related HR policy, so that business and employees are prepared for the future. This win-win

situation has to be created in co-operation with the stakeholders. Our case studies show that organizations do indeed, after a preliminary awareness-raising phase, go looking for ways to give shape to age-conscious HR policies in their organization.

Implications for Research and Theory

If we look at the results of the focus groups, we think that the three dimensions of the concept practice—content, process, and meaning—are indeed needed and fruitful to research age-related HR management and policy.

The practice concept explains why best practices do not work always and everywhere. When best practices are documented in literature, it is predominantly the content of the practice that is documented. From our research we can conclude that the relational process and the meaning that people give to practices are equally important. When we look at the results of the focus groups it becomes very clear that people underline the importance of relational processes and meanings (very context specific) if they are asked about factors that stimulate or hinder them to work enthusiastically and longer. Only when these dimensions are taken into consideration and fit in the new context the application of the best practice can be successful.

Maybe it is the restricted concept of best practice, with its almost exclusive focus on content that can explain partly why scientific research is not willing to use this concept. This is in contrast with popular management journals where the use of the term “best practice” is widespread.

Our contribution is to document that the full concept of best practice with its three dimensions—content, process, and meaning—is a generative concept to research social phenomena. Generative means that we want to build a “generative theory”: a theory that generates actions and opportunities beyond merely explaining and predicting” (Bouwen, 2003: 21). The framework is mainly intended to open the conversation concerning age-related problems and possible HR solutions. With this article we hope to reach this goal.

Based upon conversations with fellow researchers we have reason to believe that the theoretical framework, and especially the elaboration of the notion of “practices,” can be informative and useful for anybody trying to approach this issue in his or her own “practice.”

Through our specific approach a change process was set in motion in the participating organizations. By focusing on the three dimensions of a ‘practice’ and on organizational development we set in motion the full professional functioning of the employees. We aim to have effects on the employees and on the organization.

When people achieve full professional functioning they understand why it is important to work longer than initially aimed, so they change their aspirations. They want to realize a fulfilment of their aspirations, they wish to use and further develop their competencies and they want to achieve a higher level of self-efficacy.

The task of management and HR sections consists in creating the conditions that will stimulate the “desire to work, mobility, and learning” of every employee

at every stage of his career. This benefits both the individual employee and the company (see practical implications).

If in the change process, attention is not only paid to the content, but also to the process and the meaning and this is done in an OD fashion with high emphasis on co-ownership, the organization stimulates the professional development of their employees. If these three aspects (content, process, and meaning) don't get the attention they deserve, no integration is reached between aspirations, competencies and self-efficacy and no real professional development takes place.

The focus group formula, which was used in the two research projects, seems to work well to evaluate the three dimensions within the existing and changing practices. We cannot prove that the focus group is the best way to research age-related HR policies and methods. However, we have reason to support the external validity of the focus groups because participants completely convinced us that they spoke openly and honestly about the topic at hand.

We think that the research methodology, with the use of focus groups, is suitable for cross-cultural research on this topic. For future research it would be very interesting to implement the focus group methodology with the same questions in different EU countries so that cross-validations of the outcomes become possible.

Biographical Notes

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Notes

1. The European Social Fund (ESF) helps people improve their skills and, consequently, their job prospects. Created in 1957, the ESF is the EU's main source of financial support for efforts to develop employability and human resources. It helps Member States combat unemployment, prevent people from dropping out of the labor market, and promote training to make Europe's workforce and companies better equipped to face new, global challenges. For more information: www.europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/esf2000
2. For more information see www.borealisgroup.com
3. For more information see www.hasselt.be

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