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Ageing Workers in SMEs and the Influence on Corporate's Internationalization

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Abstract

The 'Ageing of Europe' phenomenon is related to a higher life expectancy of European inhabitants as well as to decreasing fertility and mortality rates. Those developments affect small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) because the number of older workers in SMEs is increasing too. Our research investigates whether older workers support corporation's internationalization. The research was conducted in SMEs in Germany, the Netherlands and United Kingdom by using a mixed method approach (questionnaires and interviews). Respondents provided us with 62 filled questionnaires and results of six semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed by simply searching for answer patterns. Findings revealed that older workers remain professional to keep international relationships running although older workers show less developed language skills, cultural awareness and flexibility. In the future, SMEs in Europe should offer trainings for older workers in foreign languages, how to work in an international environment and how to increase cultural difference awareness.

Key Words: Ageing Workers, SMEs, Internationalization

Introduction

Currently, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face two challenges. First, a considerable number of older workers will be present in SMEs in the nearby future and second, going or being international is sometimes a strategic survival decision for SMEs (Zientara, 2009, Loretto and White, 2006, Lu and Beamish, 2001). The number of older workers in Europe is increasing, according to EUROSTAT (2012) and is constituted by decreasing fertility and mortality rates with the consequence that the number of younger employees is shrinking in Europe. These developments affect SMEs since they need retain older workers or hire older workers to keep the business running. We know from literature (Kooij, de Lange and Dijkers, 2008) that older workers are often stereotyped with that they are not flexible, not willing to learn

and that they have less motivation to stay at work when they are above 50. We know also that older workers' experience and skills (e.g. good work-life balance, work attitudes) are highly appreciated when it comes to develop relationships and networks (Bernerth et al., 2008). Although we have to differentiate the type of company and the type of business in which companies are in when we consider SMEs international operating approaches (Malhotra and Hinings, 2010), we concentrate in our paper on SMEs' ageing workforces and the correlation with international relationships looking at selected countries. We selected three Central European countries (Germany, Netherlands and United Kingdom) with the underlying assumption that these countries represent a high number of SMEs who are highly international oriented and operating. In this context we

have formulated the following questions. First: In which way do older workers influence the international business relationships that are maintained by SMEs in Germany, the Netherlands and United Kingdom? Second: How should SMEs change internal employee structures in order to deal with challenges caused by an ageing workforce in Europe? To answer these questions we reviewed literature on international relationships and conducted a survey in the three selected countries.

Our paper is divided into the forthcoming sections: theoretical framework, the methodology and the results section. We finalize the paper with conclusions and recommendations including theoretical, practical implications and future research.

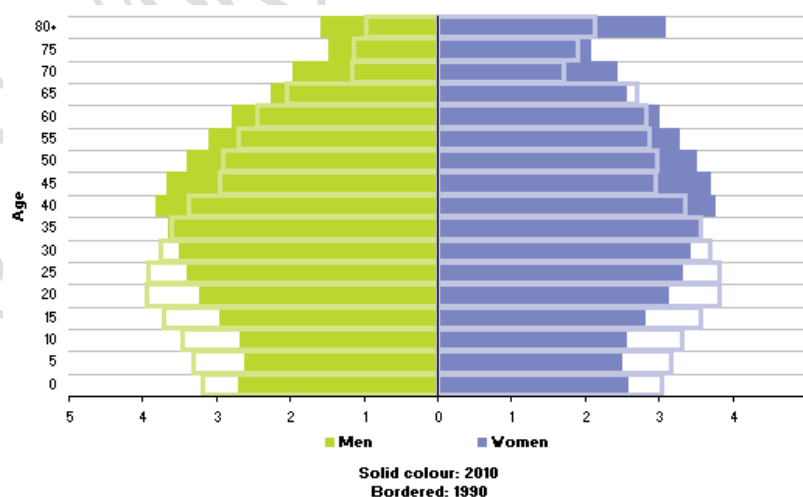
Theoretical Background

Ageing in Europe

According to Carone and Castello (2006), the ageing population is characterized by decreasing fertility and mortality rates and a higher life expectancy among the European population. The selected countries Germany, the Netherlands and

the United Kingdom are faced with a growing proportion of older people (Eurostat 2011) combined with decreasing birth rates. The main reasons for these developments are the progress made in the health care sector and in the field of social protection systems during the past decades and the changing family life decisions young people make nowadays (SHARE, 2010). Due to a risen average education time, parents are aged much older at the birth of their first child nowadays and additional factors like life style changes contribute to the declining fertility rates. In contrast, an increase of birth rates has been visible in the United Kingdom since 2001.

Figure 1 (Eurostat 2012) shows the population pyramid of the 27 European member states in 1990 and 2010. The pyramid mirrors the significant change in fertility rates and the growing proportion of older people. While the number of individuals aged 30 and younger has declined from 1990 to 2010, the population aged 40 and older has undoubtedly increased.

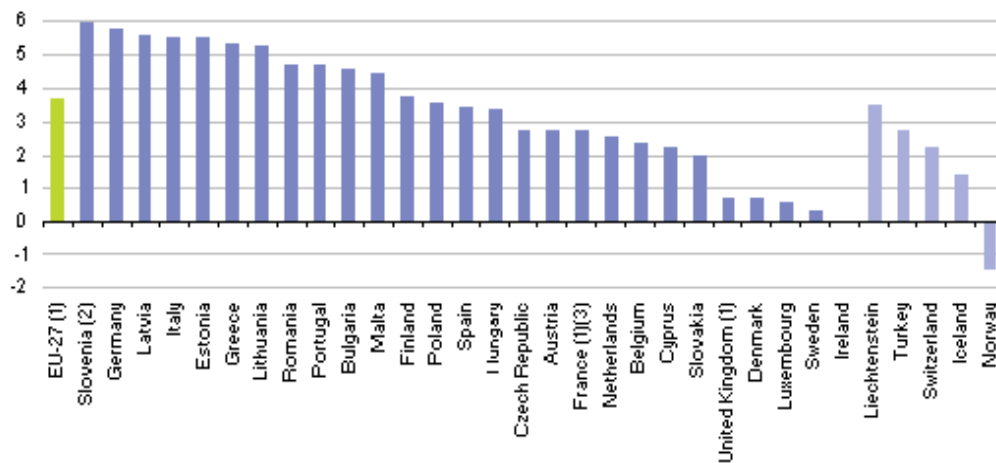


(1) Excluding French overseas departments in 1990.

Figure 1: Population Pyramid 1990-2012 (Eurostat database, 2011)

Figure 2 (Eurostat 2012) illustrates the change of the European population aged 65 or above from 1990 to 2010, expressed in percentages. A significant increase can be observed in Germany. The German population aged 65+ has risen by 5.8 percentage points between 1990 and 2012. In contrast, the Dutch population aged 65+ has risen by almost 2.5 percentage and the

65 + population in the United Kingdom has risen by only 0.8 percentages. On average, the population of the 27 member states of the European Union has risen by 3.7 percentage points. While the Netherlands and the United Kingdom provide percentage point changes below this number, Germany exceeds the European average change.



(1) Provisional.

(2) Data may be affected by the change of population definition in 2008.

(3) Excluding French overseas departments in 1990.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: demo_pjanind)

Figure 2: Change in the share of the population aged 65 years or over between 1990 and 2009, percentage point change (Eurostat, 2011)

Although Germany is the most populous country in the European Union with 82 million inhabitants in January 2010, its fertility rate counts only 1.42 children per woman. This rate is one of the lowest in the world. The population is expected to decline to 70 million inhabitants in 2060 (Destatis, 2010).

In comparison, the United Kingdom had a fertility rate of 1.92 children per woman in 2010 and represents the second highest fertility rate in the European Union near replacement level. The replacement level is defined with two children per woman. The population of the UK is expected to

rise to 76,8 million inhabitants by 2050 (Destatis, 2010). In 2009, 62 million inhabitants were counted. The Netherlands showed a fertility rate of 1.79 children per woman in 2009 and a total population of 16,575 inhabitants. The population aged above 65 will rise from currently 13 percent to 25 percent in 2040 while the total population will be expected at a level of 17,2 million inhabitants. The current Dutch population is the youngest in ageing Europe. Therefore, a gradual decline is expected in the years after 2040 when the fertility rate stagnates below replacement level.

Internationalization in SMEs

During the past decades, internationalization and the associated benefits of achieving and maintaining competitiveness became an important issue and at the same time a challenge for SMEs in Europe. The literature shows various definitions of the term internationalization related to the activities of SMEs. According to Stokes & Wilson (2006), “internationalization includes investments, cross-border clustering and any activity that facilitates the exchange of knowledge and technology between small and medium sized firms.” In this context, internationalization does not define purely the export of final products or services into foreign countries or establishing a company branch abroad. Using foreign supply relationships is mentioned by Stokes and Wilson (2006) as the most widespread form of internationalization and is used by about 30 percent of all SMEs across Europe.

According to Graham, Hooley and Wilson (1998) the location of foreign relationships is defined as: “firms initially target nearby countries and subsequently enter foreign markets with successively greater ‘psychic distance’ in terms of cultural, economic and political differences and also in relation to their geographic proximity.” However, this pattern refers to all types and sizes of companies in general and therefore location aspects of foreign business relationships have to be proved particularly for small and medium sized enterprises during this research project.

Although the internationalization process provides opportunities for growth and competitiveness for SMEs, it is seen as a challenging undertaking in many respects.

The interpersonal and intercultural communication competences of SME owners, managers and employees are according to Lewis (2006) involved in the process of maintaining internationalization issues. These are crucial competences for sharing expertise, information and knowledge that in turn characterizes the benefits of belonging to business groups and networks.

Another challenging aspect of the internationalization process is described by the added degree of diversity that internationalization causes. Diversity in general means the dissimilarities in organizations, groups, networks and working places, the range of differences that occur in any group of people interacting with each other. With the growing internationalization diverse cultures converge in companies and this cultural diversity has to be managed appropriately in order to use synergies and to reach business advantages out of diverse groups. Diversity in organizations can even bring along negative results as Williams and O’Reilly (1998) state: “increased diversity, especially in terms of age, tenure and ethnicity, typically has negative effects on social integration, communication and conflict.” Williams and O’Reilly (1998) researched over four decades about diversity and its complexity in workforces and conclude that increasing diversity can complicate the ability of groups to act stable over time and may also neglect the specific necessities of group members. However, these aspects have to be examined in the context of SMEs in order to be able to identify generalizations for this specific size of companies.

Ageing workers and SMEs Internationalization

Up to the present, no specific studies could be found that deal with the influence of ageing in Europe on international business relationships of SMEs. The results of the aforementioned literature review suggest that the two significant large-scale changes –ageing workforces and internationalization- may converge in Europe’s companies nowadays. Therefore, a combined view should merit more attention of managers as even older workers and more pressure and competition through the growing internationalization process are expected in the next years. Measures should be established to avoid potential problems and to achieve a smooth running of international relationships with the trend of older workforces in SMEs in Europe.

Methodology

We used in our research questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, a mixed method approach, which allowed us to scrutinize answers we received from the questionnaire. The method is used to ensure the validity and reliability of data collected (Verhoeven, 2011).

Sample

In total 120 SMEs were randomly selected (40 of each in Germany, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom). According to Verhoeven (2011) a randomly selected sample has its advantage in reaching persons who are involved in the survey with the equal chance of being part of the sample. Companies had to meet the European criteria of small and medium sized enterprises. This means that they may not exceed the limit of 250 employees and that they may either possess an annual turnover of max € 50 million or a total

balance sheet of max € 43 million (European Commission, 2010).

Six companies involved in different business areas have been selected for the purpose of unstructured interviews to highlight and to prove the main aspects of the survey results in more detail. Furthermore, the division of companies in the three selected European countries aimed to be as equal as possible to gain best valid results of each country. We received 62 valid questionnaires in total, 23 from companies located in Germany, 21 from Dutch companies and 18 from companies located in the United Kingdom. We conducted two unstructured interviews per country. The six interviewed companies are active in Sports Retail, Aircraft Repair Service, Beverage Trade, Recruiting Services, Online Marketing / travel websites and IT Services. SMEs employ diverse numbers of employees’ aged 50+ and have therefore different levels of experience in managing older workforces. Two companies do not employ any person older than 50 years, two companies employ about 50 percent employees above 50 years and two thirds of the last company’s employees are composed of persons aged 50+. All interviewed persons are managers or even owners of the company and therefore provide a wide overview about the business, internal processes and employee structures.

Instruments

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was set up in English. For the German companies the questionnaire was translated into a German version with a word-by-word translation. This was proved and acknowledged by a

lecturer of the International Business School of the Hanze University in Groningen and who is a native speaker of the German language and also an expert in English. The questionnaire was opened by a short description of the research project. The description aimed to introduce the respondent into the topic and the purpose of the research. The description was followed by four close-end general questions one to four dealing with attribute variables of the respondent's company: The country where the company is located, the number of employees that are currently employed, the percentage of employees who are older than 50 years and the percentage of employees who are younger than 30 years. These questions aimed to find out about the current age structures in the participating SMEs and to filter the country where the company is located. Furthermore, the companies could be filtered by small or medium sized nature. The following questions dealt with the international relationships of the respondent's and on the perceived problems within the company regarding the international relationships they maintain. The aspects of an older workforce were managed in the forthcoming questions and at the end, a question was placed about the 'ageing in Europe' phenomena in order to provide the respondent with a clear and easy to understand definition of the phenomenon which is one of the two main research aspects that are connected during the research process. A pilot testing with two test companies aiming the feasibility and validity of the questionnaire was successfully conducted prior to the data collection period.

Interview Design

Six companies were selected for a semi-structured interview with a duration of approximately 10-15 minutes. The interviews with the German and Dutch SMEs were conducted face to face at the location of the companies. In contrast, the two interviews with the SMEs in the United Kingdom were held via telephone due to the distance. Furthermore, the interviews were partly conducted parallel to the questionnaires, taking the tight time frame for this project into consideration.

The interviews were conducted in English with the Dutch and UK companies and in German with the interviewed companies in Germany. All interviews were opened by a brief description of the research project and by explaining the aspects of ageing in Europe and the internationalization process. The data were recorded by audio-recording the interview conversation. Afterwards, summaries were written that contain the main key aspects of the single interviews. The semi-structured interview form was chosen to guarantee that several aspects of research were covered in all interviews to compare the results. On the other hand, the interviews should provide new insights into the research topics to explore the research questions in more detail and to align the interview to the flow of conversation.

Analyses

The responses from the 62 returned questionnaires were analyzed by inserting the answers into an excel sheet and finding repeating patterns. The same technique was used for the outcomes of the semi-structured interviews according to Mayring (2002). In order to gain a deeper insight into the aspects of ageing in Europe and internationalization and how these aspects

are related to specific branches of economic activities, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six small and medium sized companies in total. Two interviews were conducted with SMEs of each research country to guarantee equally divided results.

Results

62 questionnaires returned back in total. 23 out of these 62 questionnaires were filled in by German SMEs, meaning 37 percent. The Dutch participation was slightly lower with 34 percent of the questionnaires or 21 completed questionnaires. 18 questionnaires returned from SMEs in the United Kingdom, representing 29 percent of the total results. While the distribution of questionnaires was nearly equally divided to the three countries, the division of returned questionnaires was slightly different. However, the results still represent an acceptable level of equality among the focused countries.

Age Distribution of Employees

The majority of companies, namely 27 out of 62, employ currently less than 10 percent persons aged 50+. Only 3 companies employ more than 50 percent older employees. In contrast, 23 out of 62 companies stated that between 10 percent and 30 percent of their employees are younger than 30 years. Additional 23 companies employ even between 30 percent and 50 percent employees of this age group. Only six companies reported that less than 10 percent of all their employees are younger than 30 years and in 10 companies more than half of the workforce is currently aged below 30.

International Relationships (countries)

In order to identify the most important international relationships that SMEs maintain nowadays around the globe, it was of crucial importance to ask for the head countries of the important foreign business partners. The results show that the United States, Germany and the Netherlands are on the top of the list, mentioned by at least nine of the participating survey companies. They are followed by the United Kingdom, France and the statement 'all over Europe' with at least six recurred remarks. Therefore, the most important intercontinental business relationships are maintained with the United States with nine remarks, followed by China and Japan (three remarks). Additionally, 21 times other countries have been mentioned once or twice: South Korea, Belgium, Australia, Israel, Norway, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Ireland, Italy, Turkey, Portugal, Poland and Denmark.

Business Groups

The majority of foreign business relationships are maintained with customers as 39 out of the 62 responding SMEs stated (62.9 percent). 18 out of 62 companies maintain their most important international business relationships mainly with suppliers (29 percent) and a minority, namely five out of 62 SMEs stated that the most important foreign relationships are held with intermediaries (8.1 percent).

Challenges with Foreign Business Relationships

26 respondents stated that they do not perceive any problems concerning their international business relationships at all, mainly because of rich experience in maintaining foreign relations or very similar cultures of the foreign business

partners. The remaining 32 respondents that represent half of the total number of respondents perceive at least some minor problems with their international business relationships. The most often (18 out of 62) mentioned problem regarding international relationships was 'awareness of cultural differences'. When this aspect was described in more detail, respondents focused on: punctuality, differing senses of urgency, different standards and contract expectations, communication problems.

Perception of Older Employees' Performance in Maintaining Foreign Business Relationships

With regard to the question how the combination of older employees' performance is related to international business relationships, 14 out of 62 respondents answered that older employees (age 50+) tend to be less suitable for maintaining foreign business relationships than younger ones (22,6 percent). Six participants out of the 14 stated that language problems of the older employees are the reason for less suitability regarding foreign relation maintenance. Two respondents specified this answer with 'English language'; the others did not mention a concrete language.

Eight respondents mentioned flexibility problems. In five cases these flexibility problems include either a lack of physical or motivational flexibility in terms of travelling abroad or flexibility to adapt to different standards or requirements in a foreign country. Flexibility, in terms of adaption to different cultures, was perceived as very important by four respondents.

Furthermore, problems of technological nature were mentioned three times. The respondents stated that older employees tend to show less understanding of e.g. new media and internet communication than younger ones. The nature of influence this aspect has on the company's foreign relationships was not mentioned.

Appraisal of the 'Ageing in Europe' Phenomenon and Future Outlook from SMEs' Perspective

11 respondents do not see any changes for their company deriving from demographic changes. Either they already employ a relatively old workforce or they do simply not perceive changes that could derive from an ageing workforce. 21 respondents mentioned the increasing competition for young, well-educated employees with appropriate skills as an important change factor for their company. The respondents concern themselves with the question how potential candidates can be recruited in times of this increasing competition and how additional attraction for these persons could be created. In their opinion, finding suitable employees will be much more complicated in future. Other frequently mentioned aspects were the problems directly related to expected older workforces. For example, an inevitable awareness for health problems was stated and the necessity of integrating an increasing number of older employees into the workforce. Life learning programs aiming to increase the employability were suggested by a respondent. In several cases respondents stated that the extent of influence caused by an increasing number of older employees is strongly dependent on the type of business. More specific, one respondent noted that in the event business probably no changes deriving from ageing

trends appear as most employees quit their jobs aged below 50. This specific job area is physically too exhausting for older generations. In other business areas older employees are treasured by their knowledge and experience as already described in the literature. In contrast, it was stated that current older employees face difficulties to adapt to the changes in technology: 'More training is needed to keep older employees up-to-date with technology'. The current generation that will age in future will overcome these problems by already being prepared to these changes through a more foresighted education nowadays. Furthermore, another perspective was mentioned with the identification of new business possibilities and opportunities through 'ageing of Europe'. An ageing society brings new market opportunities that focus on an older generation. In this context, the respondents see advantages deriving from an experienced older workforce.

Perceived Consequences of Ageing Workforces on SMEs

The ageing of Europe phenomenon was described briefly in each interview by the interviewer. The expected consequences of the trend appeared to be quite different in the interviews. The increasing competition for suitable employees was mentioned by two interviewed persons as an important change aspect. In their opinion this is applicable to all branches but especially for branches where 'highly qualified employees are required'. In contrast, another manager stated that in the relative young cities in the Netherlands the problem of a smaller pool of suitable young candidates is not expected during the next years. Furthermore, higher and longer paid salaries for older experienced

staff members and more absenteeism as a result from the older and therefore less healthy workforce were mentioned.

Older Employees' Contribution to International Business Relationships

All six managers mentioned that older employees are in their perception not necessarily less (or better) suitable for maintaining international relationships. The degree of suitability for maintaining foreign relation depends on the nature of relationships and other aspects like the specific skills of the employees, mainly language skills. Three managers mentioned the language aspect in the context of older employees' contribution to foreign relations. One manager perceives older employees as possessing less developed language skills than younger ones while the other ones do not notice any relationship between employee age and knowledge of languages. Several managers stated during the interviews that older employees can even perform better than younger ones in international relationship management due to their experiences, impartiality and solid beliefs. Differences between generations were considered as challenging. The current young generation is described as well prepared for the increasing degree of internationalization and the resulting requirements concerning technology, education and flexibility. This is due to the more international orientated education nowadays in their perception. Therefore, the current older generation seems to have more difficulties in these aspects as future older generation will do. In contrast, one manager perceives older employees to be more suitable for maintaining computer technology based problems as they have a more intensive and better foundation of the

program roots. Furthermore, he mentioned that the current university education in the United Kingdom is poorer than the education in the past in his opinion.

Age Distribution in Work Teams

Concerning the idea of an ideal age-mixed work team, four out of six managers mentioned that mixed teams consisting of about 50 percent older and 50 percent younger employees would be optimal for their company. This composition would combine the experience and knowledge of the older employees with the enthusiasm and up-to-date education of the younger employees in an optimal way creating synergies. Two managers prefer more equally aged teams which results from very specific types of business. The manager dealing with travel websites prefers exclusively younger employees because of required technical skills while the manager of the hunting sports retail store prefers older employees with hunting experiences built up over several decades.

Internal Employee Structures Considered by SME Managers in the Future

In order to find out how SMEs would react to older employees in future, an interview question was designed that focus on future employee decisions. Five out of six managers will consider employing young professionals from abroad if the demographic change leads to increasing competition on the domestic market for young professional employees. One Dutch manager would not consider employing anyone from outside the Netherlands as he prefers a homogeneous workforce. If competition for young professionals will increase, he would consider employing older employees. Two interview persons

already employ a diversified workforce consisting of employees from six different countries inside and outside of Europe. They are convinced that due to the high integration into the internationalization process of their business employees from different countries would fit optimal into the company.

As long as they provide the essential skills and experiences for the company, all managers would employ older employees instead of younger ones if the competition trend will last in future.

Conclusion

The paper tried to figure out first: in which way demographic changes in terms of age distribution influence the international business relationships that are maintained by SMEs in Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom? Second: how SMEs change internal employee structures in order to avoid the problems caused by the ageing in Europe phenomena? The statistical data provided by the European Commission (2005) has evidenced that declining fertility and mortality rates have lead to a significant older population in all three research countries over the past decades. However, Germany shows by far the largest percentage change from 1990 to 2010 concerning the European population aged 65+, followed by the Netherlands. The United Kingdom forms the rear end light with the lowest percentage point change but still shows an increased population aged 65+.

The Ageing in Europe phenomenon leads to encourage labour market participation of workers aged between 55 and 64 and this trend is expected to continue in future. The primary research of this project has discovered that managers of small and

medium sized enterprises in the three focused countries perceive increasing competition for young professionals at the employee candidate market as the most severe internal change for SMEs in future. Furthermore, through the increasing participation of older workers life experience and knowledge treasuries will stay longer in companies. Managers who do not perceive internal changes deriving from ageing in Europe already deal with a relatively old workforce in most cases.

The most important foreign relationships of the 68 companies that participated in this research are maintained with European border countries, mostly customers. If international relationships have been mentioned outside of Europe, the United States dominated in this context, followed by Asian countries. Problems concerning the maintenance of these relationships mainly occur in terms of different opinions regarding contracts and punctuality between diverse cultures and language problems.

SME managers do not generally perceive older workers as less suitable for the maintenance of the company's foreign relationships. It is strongly dependant on the business specific knowledge and the skills of the employee if foreign relationships are maintained successfully. However, when asking in more detail about the skills of older workers that are in general important for foreign relations, older workers tend to be perceived as having less developed language and technology skills in comparison to younger ones who undergo a more international school and university education nowadays. Furthermore, older workers are observed as having less physical or motivational flexibility in terms of travelling abroad and

less flexibility to adapt to different cultures than younger generations.

The more international orientated education nowadays will result in a future generation of older workers that will be more aware about the important internationalization process than the current older generation. For the current workforce in SMEs mixed employee age structures are recommended as both generations will learn from each other and therefore use synergies for the optimal maintenance of foreign relationships. Older employees should be trained in languages, current technology and cultural awareness to close gaps that result from different orientated educations between younger and older generations. Although our research contributes to theory as well as to practice with the combination of ageing workforces and internationalization in SMEs, we have to outline a few limitations of our study as follows:

First, due to the fact that the selected companies are located in three different countries in Europe, distributing questionnaires by Email seemed to be the lowest-cost and the most time effective alternative for conducting the research. Therefore, expected difficulties derived from a quite low response rate of the questionnaires sent by Email or already from refusal of permission to send companies the questionnaires. Second, the response rate of the questionnaires was about 25 percent (62 out of approximately 250 distributed questionnaires returned back). This rate is higher than the average return rate of corporate questionnaires. Almost all called companies gave their permission to send them the questionnaire. However, 75 percent of the questionnaires did not return. Third, the same challenges

were expected for the qualitative data collection that was aimed to be conducted by face to face and in case of SMEs in the United Kingdom by telephone interviews.

Recommendations

SMEs should implement a systematic applicant relationship management to ensure that the most suitable candidates apply for their vacant job positions. Job advertisements should be placed in a way that they create awareness of young, international orientated professionals who bring the appropriate education and skills for the specific position. The internet is an excellent platform which provides numerous job websites where companies have the possibility to place job advertisements. At the same time job candidates can offer their profiles for suitable employers. It is crucial that possible candidates are aware of the key advantages of the companies in general and of the specific position and vice versa as different expectations from both parties can be avoided early in this manner.

Companies that maintain international relationships and are willing to employ persons aged 50+ should emphasize the international focus of their business and the key skills applicants should possess in this context. This is important because the outcome of this research has shown that the Generation 50+ provides diverse individuals with regard to language skills, flexibility, cultural awareness and the general attendance to travel for business purposes.

As the job demand will be decreasing during the next years and decades due to the demographic changes, especially visible in Germany and the Netherlands, it is recommended to focus on active

applicant search as well. There are social media platforms like 'LinkedIn' or 'XING' that allow companies to select possible job candidates from a pool of profiles. Companies can enter applicant criteria into the system and will receive a number of preselected candidate profiles. They can contact the candidates directly via the platform. Furthermore, through the internet communication candidates often show first communication and social media skills that could be required by companies.

In countries with an expected decreasing number of young professionals it is of importance to save the existing knowledge and competences within the company. SMEs should build up analyses of job experiences and competence profiles to detect which employees are most valuable for the maintenance of the company's international relationships due to their rich experiences. A possible lack of key competences can be revealed early in order to take appropriate measures like an intensified number of training programs. Furthermore, with the help of graphs and tables managers are able to compare the performances and knowledge of their employees with other employees cross-sectional or over time.

The current research has shown that the current generation aged below 30 is perceived as a very international oriented generation, caused by the internationalization process during the past years. This generation will take their cultural awareness, language skills, social media experience and open-mindedness through their entire working life. Employees ageing 50+ should be given more training opportunities to develop their skills regarding international business

relationships. Managers should attend to form work teams consisting of mixed aged individuals as young professionals can learn from the experience of older colleagues. On the other hand, older employees can learn from the increasing international-orientated education from the young professionals. Generations at work offer a good opportunity to research on

their daily behavior in international relationships with foreign partners. What are the pros and cons from a scientific as well as from a practical point of view? Additionally, more research needs to be done how sustainable international relationships of older employees are in comparison to younger employees.

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