

## **Using all potential – sustaining workability and productivity through age specific working**

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Much has been said and written about the facts and implications of demographic change over the recent years. The message seems to slowly land: Our society is ageing, and so is Europe's workforce. Thanks to various European and national initiatives and programmes, "age management in the workplace" has become a much-used term amongst researchers and practitioners in the fields of occupational sciences, workplace health-promotion and related areas. Nevertheless – due to prevailing early-retirement-practices in many countries over the last decades - the concept of "age specific working" or even the notion of having to deal with an older workforce in the nearer future is still pretty new to those who will be most affected by the current developments: Europe's companies and organisations, especially the many smaller ones among them.<sup>2</sup>

One of the aims of the Smart Region project is to develop measures for enhancing and sustaining workability and thus employability for employees and workers in SME and support companies in implementing such measures. An important first finding on the way to reaching this goal has – once more – been: much information is still needed on behalf of the companies on what "age management" could mean in their specific context, how it can be realized and – even before *those* questions arise – what benefit it will bring them?<sup>3</sup>

### **1. Age management – What does the term refer to?**

Decreasing early retirement figures and sustaining employability can not be reached by simply trying to keep employees in the working process longer (by regulations), leaving working conditions the same. People of different age differ in their qualifications, strengths, skills and needs.<sup>4</sup> Work therefore has to be organised in a way that takes into

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1 ÖSB Consulting PLC.

2 See Kriener et al, 2004.

3 For respective results in the Austrian Smart Regions, see the "Regionalberichte" that can be downloaded on [www.smartregion.net](http://www.smartregion.net).

4 For details see BAuA, 2004.

account those differences. On company-level, the term “age management” refers to this kind of paying attention to age-related aspects in the course of daily management, the design and organisation of the workplace, work itself, human resource practices and the overall organisational culture. The aim of such a strategy is to ensure that all working people, regardless of their age, are empowered to reach both their own goals as well as the company-goals.<sup>5</sup> This definition clearly states that age management is not only for older workers but includes *all* age-groups. Ensuring employability calls for holistic and active strategies during the whole course of a working-life, not just reactive measures aimed at solving problems (due to ill health or a long-built lack of adequate qualification) towards the end of a working-biography.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Workability – a basic concept underlying age management

The concept of workability was introduced by Ilmarinen and “refers to both individual and occupational factors that are essential to a person’s ability to cope throughout their working life”.<sup>7</sup> Workability is seen as the result of the interaction between an individual’s resources, working conditions and work organisation and creates the basis for the employability of an individual. All components of the model, as shown in *figure 1*, are operating together in a dynamic process and all of them have to be taken into account in activities aimed at sustaining or enhancing workability – neither one of them can fully compensate the lack or malfunction of another.

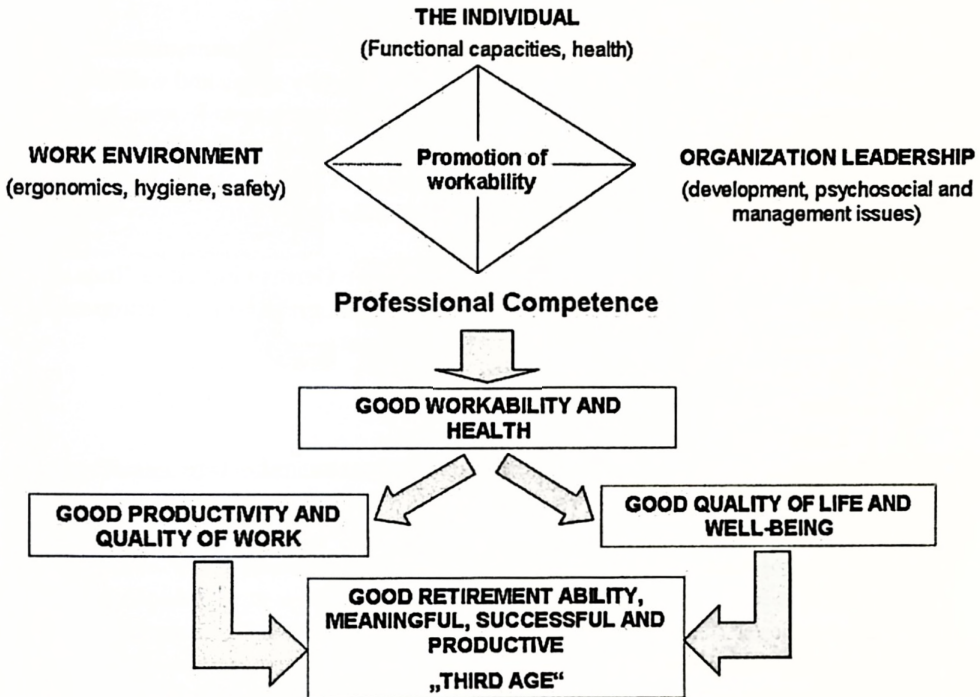
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<sup>5</sup> See Ilmarinen, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> See European Foundation, 1999 and Walker, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> See European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 1999, S. 32.

Figure 1: A basic model to improve workability during ageing  
(after Ilmarinen & Tempel, 2002, S. 237)



The model identifies four basic areas of influence on workability:

- The *individual* with his/her basic and current “functional capacity”, encompassing physical, mental and social aspects
- The *work environment*, including such factors as ergonomics, safety and hygiene as well as the organisation of work itself
- *Management and leadership issues*, reaching from the organisation and quality of leadership, human resource management and related topics to the way ageing workers are seen and related to in the company, as well as other aspects of the organisational culture

- o *Professional Competence*, taking into account training and qualification or in general the ability (or empowering) of a person to fulfil the demands of his/her job in good health.

If all of those areas are considered in daily business and management, good productivity and quality of work on one hand and good quality of life and wellbeing of the workforce on the other hand do not have to form a contradiction. Research shows that in order for measures to be really effective in improving workability, activities in individual health-promotion have to be combined with improvements in the work environment and – a factor that has shown to be of specific importance – improvements in leadership.<sup>8</sup>

Very much in accordance with the above model, the German initiative “Inqa.de” suggests five areas of action for the development of “demography-proof” companies:

- o Health – ensuring workability for all age-groups
- o Design and Organisation of work
- o Qualification, life-long learning
- o Leadership and organisational culture
- o Human resource- and recruiting-strategies that take into account the demographic change.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Creating a demography-proof company – a cycle of action

As mentioned above: bringing about significant changes demands action in a variety of areas. It also demands a systematic approach – progressing from a diagnosis and analysis of the current status in the company to the planning and implementation of measures or programmes and finally evaluating actions and effects. This basic management cycle is shown in *figure 2*.

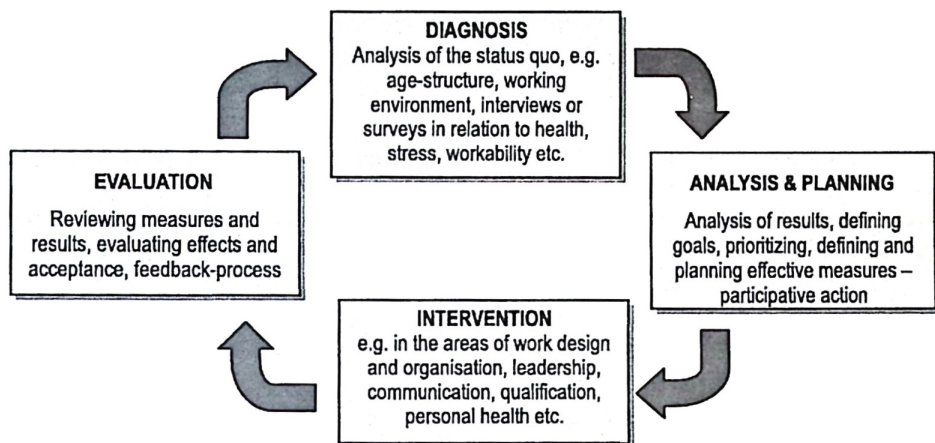
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<sup>8</sup> See Richenhagen, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> See Inqa.de, 2004, S. 17-24.



Figure 2: Basic management-cycle for age-management in the workplace



Choosing a systematic approach yet does not necessarily mean, having to think or act big. Especially when dealing with SME, large programmes can easily be seen as an excessive demand, causing companies not to act at all. What needs to be understood is that the *principles* of action are what counts – they are the same for all companies – what differs accordingly to a company’s abilities and needs, is the *extent* of the measures carried out and the specific instruments used.

To give an example – for a very small company with 10 employees a very simple “project” with the aim of enhancing wellbeing, workability and productivity could consist of the following steps:

1. **Diagnosis**: Taking a systematic look at the relevant areas of action (as shown in *figure 1*) with the help of a quick-check or a manual<sup>10</sup> (e.g. company owner alone or together with employees, external consultant etc.); Assessing workers’ feedback on their primary areas of workload and -strain, their most important resources in the working process, their most prevalent needs, their suggestions for improvement (e.g. in the course of a “health-circle” or workshop).
2. **Analysis and planning**: Analysis of the results of step 1, e.g. through discussion with the workforce and/or an external consultant; developing a plan of action (which could be limited to “the three most important steps”), planning the resources and steps of action needed.

10 As one is currently being developed in the Austrian part of the Smart Region project.

3. Intervention: Carrying out the measures – experience shows that many improvements, especially when developed making use of the enormous “experts-knowledge” of the workforce itself – are as simple and non-costly as those examples: changes in the way information is distributed within the company; enlargement of the scope of action of employees, so that the workload can be “balanced” according to the individual’s personal needs and abilities; more possibilities for developing perspectives and giving and receiving feedback – e.g. through implementing regular appraisal interviews etc. Other activities, such as ergonomic improvements, training or health-related interventions may of course need external support and additional resources and should be carried out according to the company’s abilities.
4. Evaluation: in this case, evaluation does not need to produce scientific evidence for the effectiveness of certain measures, but collect a feedback on effectiveness and adequacy of measures as seen and experienced by the people involved in the changes – thus serving as a basis for taking decisions on where to continue and what to change. Seen pragmatically, in many cases, systematically asking workers for their assessment of the implemented measures will do (e.g. through personal interviews, a simple survey or a moderated discussion).

#### 4. Conclusion

Although „age management“ has become a major topic in various initiatives over the last few years, many challenges still are to be faced concerning the carrying out of respective programmes in companies and organisations. One of the first hurdles to be taken is the enhancement of providing companies with relevant information on the changes that take place in the ageing-process, the areas of action for improving and sustaining workability and the gain both individuals and companies get out of such efforts. The need to raise consciousness for the effects that prevailing values and preconceptions about ageing have on the organisation of working-life - and thus on the workforce, companies and the labour market - should not be underestimated in that context. As the Finnish Institute of Occupational health states on their website: “The most important thing by far is to change our attitude about aging, and modify our work practices accordingly. A good and balanced work life requires the input of all age groups.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.ttl.fi/Internet/English/Thematic+pages/Ageing+and+work/>.

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