

## **Management of active ageing in France in businesses: Some case-studies**

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### *Abstract*

If some European countries started work on age management long ago, several reports confirmed the urgency and the complexity of age management in France. The low participation of French older workers in the labour market was the result of premature exclusion, within a context of high unemployment and industrial restructuring. Discrimination concerning access to jobs and training persists with regard to older workers. The management of ages is not yet something from which enterprises could expect a return, because of the socio-cultural negative perceptions and image of older workers. Nevertheless, some companies start to implement innovative initiatives and test new solutions for promoting active ageing. This article brings some examples of those experiences and concludes with the necessity to reconcile “age, work and training” to favour social links and better sharing between generations promoting “aging, living and working well together”.

### *Résumé*

Le taux de participation faible de la population active des travailleurs âgés en France est le résultat d'une politique de retraite anticipée dans un contexte de chômage important et de restructurations industrielles. Les discriminations concernant l'accès à l'emploi et à la formation des personnels vieillissants persistent. Le management de l'âge n'est pas encore à l'ordre du jour des agendas des entreprises en France en raison de représentations négatives tenaces relatives aux travailleurs de plus de 45 ans. Cependant, un certain nombre d'entreprises commencent à mettre en œuvre des initiatives innovantes et à tester de nouvelles solutions pour promouvoir le travailleur vieillissant. Cet article rend compte d'expériences menées dans des entreprises et de la nécessité de (ré)concilier « âge-travail-formation » pour permettre la création de liens sociaux intergénérationnels et promouvoir « un mieux vieillir, travailler et vivre ensemble ».

Key words : older workers, work, human resource management, inter-generational links

Mot clés : travailleurs vieillissants, travail, management des ressources humaines, liens intergénérationnels.

### Introduction

If some European countries started work on age management long ago, several reports confirmed the urgency and the complexity of age management in France. The low participation of French older workers in the labour market was the result of premature exclusion, within a context of high unemployment and industrial restructuring. Discrimination concerning access to jobs and training persists with regard to older workers. Employees over 45 years old are less

concerned about the risk of unemployment than other employees, but they are much more affected by long-term unemployment. And, among older workers, a strong culture of early retirement from the labour market also persists. Also, tackling the management of age is not yet something from which enterprises could expect a return, which means that they were hesitant to become involved because of the socio-cultural perceptions and image of older workers. But after the question of active senior was joked for decades, the French government launched a tremendous national TV spots campaign promoting ageing active since the end of October 2006. But, some firms with the support of some programmes of the European Social Fund (Racine, 2005) have already come to realise the need to break with this early retirement culture, and tested new solutions for promoting active ageing: from including older workers towards management of all ages promoting diversity. In this paper actions and practices of some French businesses are explored.

### 1. 'Modernizing with Older Workers': France 3's experience

With 4,800 employees, the France 3 television station represents a large French public network in terms of staff members. Employees are journalists, administrators and technical staff bringing together different occupations. France 3 has acknowledged the demographic framework and shifts recently, and launched a programme called "Moderniser avec les seniors" (To modernize with older workers).

This company has registered its policy intention of fighting against all forms of discrimination in its strategic plan. Therefore, including older workers in the TV channel modernization plan implied to identify conceptions of age and work and to analyse the place of the various generations in the enterprise in order to develop suitable strategies for action. It is worth incorporating this prior work into more comprehensive strategies for change: corporate plan, revitalisation of management of human resources, need to take a fresh look at production arrangements. This is what France 3 did. The working life plan as well as keeping workers in their fifties in the firm was one of their central focuses. The point was to promote employability and allow older workers to remain in the company until retirement age by energising the second part of worker career: how to stimulate age management in firm and developed tools.

The first step in this project was conducting, with a private Human Resource services, a study of a population of employees over 50 years of age in order to investigate the way in which they perceive their situation and the prospects that are offered to them. It asked the employees to fill out a questionnaire and obtained a high rate of return. It turn out that the people felt involved and wanted to give their opinion on this subject. It also conducted qualitative interviews. From this enquiry it emerged that people that are over 50 years old consider themselves in a critical phase: their past is scarcely taken into account and not valued much. The people polled described in detail their feelings of being rejected. After a period of frequent promotions, the company no longer offers prospects other than stagnation. The key words used are "fatigue", "weariness" and "end of growth". The study referred to three attitudes adopted by the employees. Some choose preservation, maintaining their image for themselves and others by adopting different strategies. Others opt for withdrawal, distancing themselves with regard to the company and investing themselves elsewhere. The largest number, finally, choose to leave the company.

Faced with these findings, France 3 developed in the second step an action plan for "Older workers in companies" (Dans les entreprises les seniors), in order to allow them to experience the lengthening of working life under the best conditions possible. And beyond the problematic issues of older workers, France 3 tried to think of solutions concerning all age groups in a comprehensive way. It wanted to ask itself more generally about the method of career management for the whole staff. Two actions were thus put in place, intended for people in their fifties but also for younger people: Orient the employees, through "The mid-career meetings" (RDV mi-carrière) and develop new roles in the company.

Indeed, first of all, France 3 developed a tool for orientation and positioning intended for employees between 40 and 45 years of age, who are halfway through their career. This approach was basically preventive. It aims to set up a dynamic, open up prospects and allow these employees to develop a real career plan so that they do not feel that they are facing a ceiling or a professional impasse. This tool took the form of group meetings, where the employees expressed their hopes and shared their objectives and expectations. Secondly, the company allowed employees, in particular those in their fifties, to develop new roles. The intention was not to replace the functions occupied by the employees, but to permit them to take on new roles based upon their experience. Their expertise is then put to use in the role of trainer or mentor. These two examples illustrate the approach that the company used in the process of starting. It involved developing a path, sometimes in parallel to a traditional work activity, by adding a new role that took into account the distinctive characteristics of the employees. If this experience did not address itself specifically to a population of workers over 50 years of age, nonetheless, people who felt that they were at the end of their careers became aware that the company was investing in their prospects. For France 3, the response to the withdrawal of the oldest employees applied to all age groups. They thought it would have been a mistake to handle the issue of seniors as though it related only to them, by using methods that apply only to this age group. This attitude would have reinforced the isolation of the older workers and contributed to their stigmatisation. On the contrary, for France 3, recreating dynamic energy is necessary, as far upstream as possible.

## 2. Managing knowledge and competence transmission: Lionet Décor “Atout-Age”

Revitalising training arrangements and knowledge transmission was the orientation taken by Pierre Lionet, Director of Lionet Décor, a medium enterprise (Anact, 2006). His company employs 50 people in different trades (painters, plasterers, carpet layers, people who install roller blinds, curtains, ceilings, salespeople, and administrative staff). 70% of the company’s clientele are private individuals, accustomed to very high quality. Lionet feels very concerned about people retiring because one-quarter of our employees are over 50 years old. For him, they have expertise in the trade and both upstream and downstream knowledge. But, also this population is versatile. To alleviate this problem, his company set up the “Age Asset” project (Atout’Age), which aimed to maintain the company’s competence while integrating new employees.

Three tutors went on a training course and were able to draw up an assessment of their occupational skills. They then transmitted this know-how and helped those being tutored in their relationships with the people around them. In such a programme, communication was indispensable for setting the conditions for transferring competences. The tutors, those being tutored and the director, devoted time to implementing this form of communication. They incorporated the tutoring schedule into their respective timetables. In this way the tutor was able to execute the chronological learning plan. The management was committed to a competency management approach and integrated the necessity for intergenerational sharing of know-how into its decisions.

This experiment turned out to be satisfying and was closely watched by company’s staff. It seems that the role of the head of the company in the introduction of such an approach was essential. Everyone was conscious of the loss brought about by the departure of the older workers and the necessity of transmitting competences to the youngest workers. In this experience, young workers were very motivated. Equipped with mobile telephones, they were able to call the tutors as soon as a problem arose at the work site. The tutors were able to support the workers on site the next day. A trusting relationship was established. In addition, the company recruited an engineering student (at master degree level) within an end-of-studies internship agreement to identifying competences in all the trades in the company. Her presence for two days a week in the company helped the project stay on course. She made the link

between all of the trades in the company. This preparatory work helped the company to create reference guides for each occupation and extend the internal training with tutors. On several work sites, the company was able to develop tutoring worksheets, on which each person could add their comments. The transfer of competencies was considered a priority for maintaining the quality of the company services for their customers and for the company's survival.

### 3. Promoting knowledge diversity and sharing knowledge: Cedilac's experience of "Former à tous âges"<sup>1</sup>

Cedilac is a factory which belongs to an important milk companies' group. At the industrial site of Cedilac, in Vienne, in the Isère, the factory Cedilac specialized in Ultra-Temperature Sterilization Unit (UHT) milk manufacturing, hires over 200 people; almost half of them are over 45 years old. Its main activity is. In order to strengthen the links between the generations in work teams, "a new pact between the generations" could be implemented; so as to ensure that skills are complementary, young people are integrated, older workers are kept and career mobility is increased. Especially, in a tight labour market the intergenerational bond must be maintained with concrete tools. Bonds are thus created in both directions, bringing about a flourishing intergenerational dynamic: older people transmit and young people learn. The experienced employees must also continue to learn, while the youngest people are not completely devoid of experience.

The Cedilac employees are older and the company is having trouble recruiting for the key occupations (manufacturing, packaging, maintenance). Although the age of the supervisors is around 35, the age of the majority of the team members is over 45. These experienced employees know a great deal and must share their knowledge for Marie-Antoinette Blondin, Head of Human Resources at Cedilac company (Racine, 2005). Therefore, she launched a project named "Training at all ages" (Former à tous les âges)<sup>2</sup>. Older worker would transmit their experiential knowledge to youngsters, and the young people would give their elders the benefit of their skills in other areas, such as information technology. Because the operators had lost a vision of the whole of the system, and good practices were not being transmitted, a reference tool was necessary. The idea was to manage the career paths better and teach the people who had the know-how ways to formalise it. This entailed bringing together the people working in the workshops and asked them to do a breakdown. This request required the employees to conceptualise, look at the details of the chain of events and the problems that cropped up as well as actions that were inappropriate, risky or inadvisable for reasons of effectiveness or organisation. Fifteen people who repair installations downstream followed very concrete training courses that yielded good results and helped at developing tools.

First of all, in order to capitalise on knowledge, diagnostic sheets in computerised form were created. From now, they constitute a database for searching for good methods for solving breakdowns. The diagnostic sheets led to more mixed results. This is in fact an ongoing tool: a person on permanent assignment is required to update the data. Feedback and formalisation sessions are necessary, as well as a dedicated coach. But for the workers, accessing the sheets is not yet a natural reflex. Secondly, the company was able to formalise numerous actions previously done orally. Thus the sheets for inspecting the machines allow an amateur operator to perform checks on the machine with complete peace of mind. And they will be updated in the future, because they have been unanimously recognised as useful.

Through this experience, knowledge management and making effective use of experience was the focus for businesses in order to survive and to prosper. This experience and knowledge of

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<sup>1</sup> Abattu C., Lamotte B., (2005), L'expérience de transfert croisé de compétences entre les générations, in Quintreau B. (Coord.), Raoult N. (Coord.), 2005, *La diversité des âges. Regards croisés d'experts*, Liaisons sociales.

<sup>2</sup> Blondin M.A., (2005), *Former à tous les âges, L'entreprise Cedilac (Candia) en Rhône-Alpes*, Communication à l'Agora Equal, L'expérience est capital, Carrousel du Louvre, Paris, 24 et 24 juin. Cette contribution présente les expériences de formation des seniors dans l'entreprise Cedilac (Candia) dans le cadre du programme Equal.

older workers and its transfer challenge the assumptions underlying the accepted way of doing things: “best practices”.

## Conclusion

France has been characterized by its older workers focusing on early retirement. But France cannot any longer sustain a systematic policy of rejecting aging workers. This policy has led gradually to the recognition that early retirement was merely an easy way out of the problem that has many substantially adverse effects on the economic, political, and social spheres. Also, this policy of early exit has been criticized for its cost for years in France, and the decision to change this policy is not surprising. Even though this policy field is particularly deep institutionalised, policy makers are nowadays opting for a path departure through incremental changes. If for the last two years, the government has been involved in a voluntarist reform policy aimed at helping people over 50 return to work, older workers working and retiring conditions have to be improved.

A new consensus on age management has to be implemented promoting links between the generations: “ageing, living and working well together”, (le “bien ‘vieillir vivre et travailler’ ensemble”). It must set up concrete measures to assist and stimulate the necessary changes of attitude.

Already, the image of older workers held by businesses and employees as well as by public opinion must be modified. The socio-cultural perceptions of older workers must change and in the workplace, stereotypes should be eliminated. Business managers and the people involved in counselling, training and employment may not necessarily have the means to tackle these new challenges. Human resources managers are starting to become familiar with the concepts, methods and tools needed for providing suitable answers, but only a few large enterprises seem to have acquired a certain amount of experience in this area. Therefore, the challenge should stress the widely-held prejudices relating to older workers, and calls on business sectors and local authorities to become involved in an awareness-raising exercise directed at heads of companies, executives, employees and their representatives and in small and medium enterprises as well.

Also, to make career paths more secure, adjustment initiatives for retirees could be made more attractive. The aim is to put in place ways of anticipating the conditions for the retention and career development of workers aged 45 and over. The implementation of an appropriate policy for keeping or reemployment of older workers implies action in different directions: change in employment practices and behaviours; emphasis on job placement; expansion of sources of employment; targeted, motivating training in an individualized program; and local management based on partnership. A proactive policy must guide the public authorities, enterprises, unions, and workers.

The promotion of strategies of diversity is a major contribution of transnational cooperation, through which all concerned have come to realise the value of promoting work teams representing the whole range offered by society, in order to make them into a forum conducive to the development of social cohesion practices. The management of all ages also provides an opportunity to take a completely fresh look at training mechanisms and systems in order to be more effective in “learning to learn at any age” and so that the skills acquired throughout life are put to use in work teams.

Beyond the 2004 French law of Social Modernisation, promoting lifelong learning and the accreditation of experience scheme, it is necessary to focus on the establishment of systems of cross-transfer of skills, which is a way of completely revitalising the practices of tutorship and mentoring and implies that human resource departments have also to refresh the way they manage their work force. The management of all ages questions the practices and will improve strategies of human resources involving the reformulation of practices of forward management and the renewal of all systems, all resources and all existing tools. For instance, human

resources departments will have to care about well-being, health and work conditions of their workers to set up a sustainable and quality age management. And the success of such action rests on a solid partnership connecting people whatever the age and the position. Indeed, this pact and those new conditions of intergenerational work will help at transferring the knowledge between older and younger workers, at facilitating exchanges between peers and will participate to the essential knowledge management (Gendron, 2004).

Policy-makers, local authorities, social partners and businesses have to anticipate developments in age more effectively and to impulse new solidarity between the generations. It is necessary to allow both older workers and young employees to develop all the growth potential they have instead of excluding them from the labour market. All the resources available must be mobilised to put this strategy into practice. Like a better balance between the generations, the transitions between different ages also have to be managed better. And through those examples, it seems that good practices are based on a specific diagnosis, a tailored action plan comprising a battery of tools and mechanisms that are often combined in order to meet the requests of employees as much as the needs of enterprises: improvement in working conditions, establishment of a collective framework negotiated with employees' representatives, partial and progressive retirement schemes.

To end, taking into account inter-European comparisons, France still appears as one of the 'bad pupils' in the EU, and seems to be late in its policy towards older workers. The EU involvement may become a resource for the French policy-makers that would validate the legitimacy of the policy change. The exchange of information and the resource of European good practices may also suggest policy options and new orientations to stop the 'vicious circle' of early exit.

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