

AN ALTERNATIVE LEARNING PATH FOR PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES

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Abstract: *The paper considers the results of desk and field research on the strengths and weakness of young and older employees carried out in eight EU countries. In addition, it outlines the competence gaps of public sector employees 30- and 50+. Furthermore, the paper presents an alternative learning path that will improve the competences of the employees in the public sector making an attempt to bridge the intergenerational gap thus fostering their competitiveness on the labour market. Conclusions about the effectiveness of the proposed learning path are drawn.*

Keywords: COMPETENCE GAPS, PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES, KEY COMPETENCES, INTERGENERATIONAL COOPERATION

1. Introduction

Europe is severely affected by population ageing. Its negative effects are visible in the changing demographic structure of the labour market, the situation of people 50+ and the cooperation of representatives of this age group with younger co-workers (30-). The situation is particularly hard in the public sector where many people 50+ are employed. They are rarely released from work, which impedes the employment of young people due to the so called "freezing of positions". The growing gap between those age groups of employees makes it difficult to communicate and transfer experience and knowledge from older to younger ones and IT and foreign language skills the other way around. This results in high level of tension between different generations at the workplace – older employees receive routine and monotonous tasks just to enable them to survive until retirement age whereas younger ones compete trying to develop new work schemes that have already been created. In addition, the dismissal of an employee because of low quality of their work is rare. Keeping of older employees at work until their retirement blocks positions and prevents young people from employment.

Due to the above challenges posed by the labour market, improvement of competences is of vital importance for persons who enter the labour market (30-) and those with vast professional experience (50+). Therefore a large partnership constituting eight EU countries – Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Poland have carried out desk and field research to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the above age groups in the public sector in relation to their competences and the respective competence gaps, as well as to introduce an alternative learning path that can improve knowledge and skills and strengthen intergenerational cooperation at the workplace.

2. Prerequisites

The desk and field research among the above mentioned European partnership has identified certain strong and weak points of young (30-) and older (50+) employees in relation to their performance at work, including public sector employees. They are shown in fig. 1 and fig. 2, and are arranged in the order from the most often to the least often indicated by partner countries. Figure 1 shows that there is a universal set of characteristics which young people who enter the labour market share. However, different countries pay attention to difference aspects of competences and behaviour.

The main strengths of people who are at the start of their professional career are flexibility and adaptability to changes. They are willing to face new challenges and are not afraid of taking risks. While demonstrating an ability to grasp new concepts quickly and easily, they are very willing to learn and improve their competences and obtain new qualifications. Employees 30- have high aspiration – they are very creative, motivated and ambitious. They have no difficulty in using technical innovations and demonstrate very good knowledge and skills in computers. The above mentioned strengths

are indicated to be of key importance in most partner countries. Some additional features are also mentioned ranging from availability, education, knowledge of foreign languages to some personality traits such as self-confidence.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Flexibility and adaptability	Lack of professional experience and competences
Ability to grasp new concepts fast	Necessity for supplementary training
Creativity	Holding unrealistic expectations
Predisposition to risk taking	Difficulties in accepting established procedures, standards and rules at the organization
Ambitious	Changing workplace easily
Motivated	Lack of interpersonal skills
Very good command of ICT	Lack of communication skills
Openness	Lack of critical thinking
Dynamism	Emotional instability and impatience
Perceiving change as an opportunity	Low level of company loyalty
Availability	Influence of family-life factors on work
Knowledge of foreign languages	Unethical behaviour
Up-to-date education	Difficulty in solving non-routine problems
Versatility	Lack of independence
Self-confidence	Escalating conflicts
Ability to perform multi-tasks assignments	
Enthusiasm	
Lack of fixed working habits	
Ability to work in multicultural environments	

Fig. 1 Strengths and weaknesses of employees 30-

However, the weaknesses of young employees are those which lead to high unemployment rate and respectively low employment rate, which actually appears a barrier for their successful performance on the labour market. Their greatest weak point is the lack of professional experience and competence, which requires investment in training and respectively incurs additional costs. Employers from most partner countries also emphasize the lack of interpersonal and communication skills. Moreover, employees 30- demonstrate demanding attitudes and hold unrealistic expectations in relation to wages. They are perceived as unstable, changing workplaces easily and quite frequently. They resist the existing behaviour patterns, standards and rules established within a given organization and do not recognize authorities thus sometimes leading to conflicts. Due to their instability and impatience they want to achieve effects immediately.

Unlike young employees, the biggest asset of those 50+ is their professional and life experience. They often have great expertise in a given sector, good knowledge of the organization and an extensive network of contacts. In addition, they can share their knowledge and experience with other employees. It is common that mature employees are mentors or coaches who support younger co-

workers. The employers especially value their stability. They are also appreciated for their loyalty and attachment to the employer. They relatively rarely change their workplace. Employees 50+ are responsible, reliable and accurate when performing their tasks. Furthermore, they possess essential interpersonal skills. The combination of maturity and vast expertise allows them to approach different problems from various perspectives and handle difficult situations.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Vast professional experience	Low flexibility
High level of company loyalty	Lack of openness to changes
High level of responsibility and reliability	Learnt working habits and unwillingness to change them
Sharing knowledge and experience with other employees	Lack of knowledge of technical innovations and computers
Stabilized private life	Lower physical capacity
Worldly wisdom	Inability to speak foreign languages
Extensive expertise and knowledge of organization	Outdated qualification
An extensive network of contacts	Low creativity
Good interpersonal skills	Grasping new concepts at a slower pace
An ability to handle difficult situations	Inability to present themselves
Judiciousness	Potential absences because of sickness
Emotional stability	High labour costs
Professional behaviour	Unwilling to obtain new qualifications
An ability to prioritize	Lack of self-confidence
Patience and perseverance	
Conscientiousness	
Accuracy and punctuality	

Fig. 2 Strengths and weaknesses of employees 50+

Despite their strong points, employees 50+ experience some weaknesses as well. The main one is their low level of flexibility, which manifests itself in the reluctance to novelty and disapproval of changes. These employees have developed certain habits and have their strong views on what and how tasks should be performed, i.e. they find it difficult to adjust to new conditions. They do not want to take risks and tend to avoid new challenges. Employees 50+ are not always willing to learn new things or acquire new skills, which may lead to situations where their competences are inadequate or insufficient to the requirements imposed by the labour market. It is especially visible in the case of new technologies. Moreover, possible sickness may lead to absenteeism. It should also be mentioned that the above weaknesses may deepen with age.

In order to offer an adequate training for public sector employees 30- and 50+ so that they can respond to the above challenges, their training needs, i.e. the so called competence gaps have been identified on the basis of their strength and weakness. Those competence gaps actually refer to the European key competences.

The employers from the eight EU countries have outlined the following competence gaps for young public sector employees:

- ability to determine and justify priorities;
- ability to organize one's work and carefully perform it;
- ability to work and perform different tasks independently;
- ability to recognize and solve problems;
- ability to handle stressful situations;
- ability to manage projects;

- ability to work in a team;
- commitment and initiative;
- appropriate self-assessment;
- effective communication;
- social competence.

The competence gaps of mature employees mainly results from the introduction of new technologies and changes in economy. Deficits occur where constant update of knowledge and skills is required. The employers have identified the following competence gaps:

- IT competence;
- a sense of initiative and entrepreneurship;
- ability to express oneself in public or to present oneself;
- ability to learn (lifelong learning);
- motivation to obtain new qualification and/or retrain;
- flexibility and ability to accept changes;
- foreign language competence.

In addition, in the age of globalization and constant changes there are some competence gaps specified for both employees 30- and 50+:

- tolerance of diversity;
- creative skills;
- critical thinking;
- cross-cultural competence;
- intergenerational communication.

3. Alternative solution

Taking into consideration the above presented strengths and weaknesses of young and older employees, as well as the competence gaps of public sector employees 30- and 50+, an alternative learning path has been developed so as to bridge those gaps in an intergenerational context.

The learning concept intended for public sector employees 30- and 50+ is structured in such a way that the learners can work in an environment of intergenerational cooperation, which makes possible the transfer of knowledge and sharing of skills among different age groups. The learning path provides an opportunity to build the required job-related competences and to understand the processes which different people are responsible for.

The learning cycle contains 60 learning units, each designed for 45 minutes, grouped into four modules:

- **Computer Skills** (20 learning units). It aims to improve the administrative work of public sector employees by using more effectively Microsoft Office and web applications. The training offers a common application in a more accessible way. The specific nature of work in the public institutions leads to the fact that most employees are not familiar with the common functionality rules of the applications they use every day. Actually in order to perform their tasks they use only some functionalities developed by the IT experts. This approach limits the knowledge of the individual applications and the employees often don't know the functionalities for automation of different activities. A good example is Excel. It is used as a calculator rather than for analyzing data, presenting in

a graphic form or performing simulations. Young employees will enhance their competence in Word, Excel and Power Point whereas mature ones – in Word, Excel and web browsers.

- Business English** (20 learning units). It is designed for language level B1/B2 for employees 30- and A2 for employees 50+. The main aim is not only to get learners familiar with the basic business terminology but also to improve their presentation and communication skills, to motivate them to work in a team, to encourage them to use modern technologies and to make them cooperate effectively within their organizations. Furthermore, it will help public sector employees to be more self-confident in various communication situations which require language skills in Business English. The learners will be acquainted with English terms necessary for the efficient use of office equipment and Internet. In addition, learners will be able to introduce themselves and their professional responsibilities, to voice their opinion, to understand instructions and basic problems related to office equipment, to use logic argumentation, to write invitations and letters, to develop presentations.
- Communication and Intergenerational Cooperation** (8 learning units). It allows learners to get aware of cultural differences, effective communication and the benefits that young and old generations could bring to the workplace. It focuses on building skills in self-conception and self-expression in front of an audience, intergenerational cooperation, flexibility and acceptance of changes, multicultural competence.
- Simulation Game** (12 learning units). It aims to establish conditions for cooperation between the two age groups; to perform joint tasks related to intergenerational cooperation; to transfer experience; to put into practice the knowledge and skills acquired during the previous three modules. The main result of the Simulation Game is piecing together a jigsaw which presents intergenerational cooperation in a funny way.

During the first three modules the two age groups learn and work separately. The training is implemented in the form of a project where each age group learns step by step and works towards a specific goal set in advance. The approach of learning by doing is used. Those modules are based on situations and problems that public sector employees face every day at work. The main aim of the training is to improve the work of public sector employees and to stimulate their creativity.

Within the last module, the Simulation Game, the two age groups meet and work together. Now mixed-age groups fulfill various tasks so as to successfully cooperate by using their strengths in achieving the final goal of the game.



Fig. 3 A model of the learning path

4. Results

Within the eight EU partner countries a total of 88 public sector employees 30- and 89 public sector employees 50+ have been trained through the above stated learning path. In general, the results show a high level of appreciation of and satisfaction with the four modules offered.

The learners think that the Computer Skills module is very useful and suitable. They highly evaluate project work and the presence of few theoretical explanations. The availability of some lower scores is due to the different level of initial IT competence of the learners. For example, in Bulgarian the older learners voice their opinion that this module is quite difficult whereas the younger express the opposite opinion. In most countries, especially the representatives of the older generation are satisfied with the knowledge acquired for working with Microsoft Office.

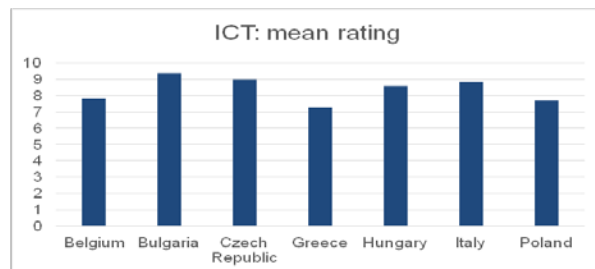


Fig. 4 ICT mean rating by partner countries

The Business English module appeals to most learners. However, not all of them think that the learning content fully meets their professional needs and expectations. Nevertheless, the way of presenting and explaining the learning content is highly evaluated, especially in Belgium.

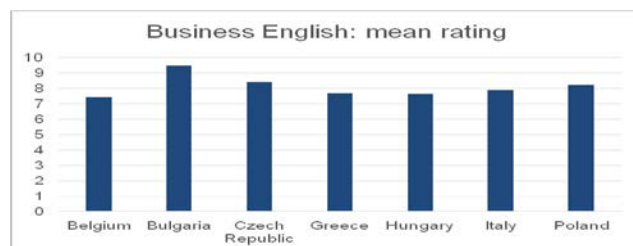


Fig. 5 Business English mean rating by partner countries

The Communication and Intergenerational Cooperation module is graded highest. The learners say that its content is very useful for their work. In most countries public employees 50+ highlight the importance of this module for better understanding of intergenerational integration, the characteristics of both age groups, as well as cooperation possibilities (mutual benefits).

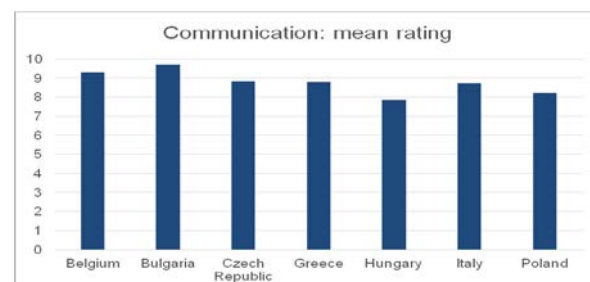


Fig. 6 Communication and Intergenerational Cooperation mean rating by partner countries

The Simulation Game is given a very high score, in some countries even the highest one. The intergenerational context is clear to all learners. The cooperation of the two age groups is considered as a positive experience by all participants. The Game, as a learning method, is positively rated as well and it is perceived as a different and interesting approach.

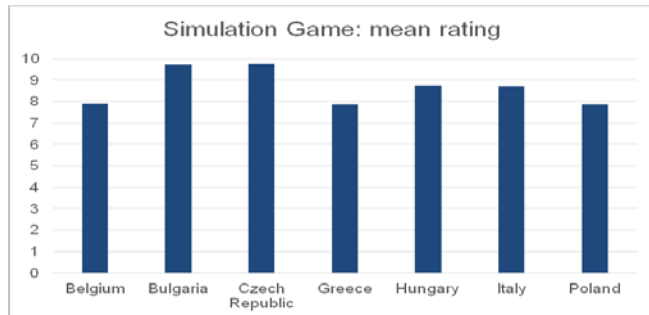


Fig. 7 Simulation Game mean rating by partner countries

In conclusion, the average score of all modules is about 8, which can be considered a good achievement. The Communication and Intergenerational Cooperation module and the Simulation Game are perceived as the most interactive and most useful in the professional context. Apart from the specific skills that the participants learn by those modules, also the fact that there are no prominent deviations in skill level between participants is the reason why those modules are considered as more useful than the other two. However, the following general recommendations can be outlined:

- The modules cover quite general needs for public sector employees. They should be customized to more specific needs as much as possible (e.g. only include the Communication module and Simulation Game if Computer Skills and Business English are not relevant in the professional context);
- It could be more useful if learners are selected not only by age but by other criteria as well, e.g. by entrance skill level so that the training can be more effective for all learners. Mixing the two generations together in the first three modules would also encourage peer learning;
- If a group still has an heterogeneous level, the difference in skills can also be dealt with by dividing the participants into “learning groups”, with one or two more skilled participants who can support the others;
- The order of the first three modules can be adjusted according to the specific needs of the participants.
- At the beginning of each module it would be good to include an ice breaker of about 15 minutes thus giving the learners and trainers the chance to get acquainted with one another.

4. Conclusions

The presented alternative learning path provides public sector employees 50+ and 30- with professional, language and social skills, which will encourage their professional and personal growth and will establish conditions for the successful implementation of age management and intergenerational cooperation at the workplace. The learning methods used are specifically designed to be applied in a multi-cultural age-diverse environment.

Furthermore, the learning path will foster the competitiveness of both age groups on the labour market by providing them with the required knowledge and skills for successful professional career.

This, in turn, will contribute to better, faster and more responsive services, which is one of the priorities of the public sector.

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