45+ AGEING AND WORK LIFE

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Changes in business life and age structure

Man has several different ages. According to an American assumption, a person is adult at the age of 25-45 years, aging when he has reached 45, aged after reaching 55 years, elderly at the age of 75 and old after reaching 85 years.

According to a review published by OECD in 1998 the share of aging people in the total labour force will increase rapidly in future (OECD 1998). In 1995 the share of 45-59 years old employees in the labour force in Finland was 31.4%, and in 2030 it will be 32.2%. The share of employees aged over 60 years was 2.8 % in 1995, while the figure for 2030 will be 4.7 %. The development in Finland is similar to the average trend in other countries of the European Union. By 2010 about 20 % of the entire population of Europe will be over 60.

People are gradually beginning to realize how important it is to promote and sustain the fitness for work of aging employees, to support their job satisfaction and encourage them to continue working. The urgency of this issue is underscored by the above-mentioned distortion of our age structure and special characteristics related to the use and availability of labour force; while the share of aging workers increases we are also facing a reduction of available labour force through retirement and an actual labour shortage.

The rapid change of the age structure calls for immediate action. According to calculations made by Statistics Finland, the number of employed people aged 25-39 will decrease by 100,000 persons between the years 1997 and 2005 in Finland while the number of employees aged 55-64 will increase by 180,000.

Training to promote high ability can help

Workplaces are usually communities comprising people of highly different backgrounds and ages with different skills and experiences. It is never a segmented pre-school or old-age home. For this reason we need a totally new approach and have to acknowledge the fact that older workers may differ from each other very much.

To cope with the general challenges posed by ageing in the near future, we need not only multidisciplinary research that takes complex working and living conditions into account but also a genuine interest in the operation of (especially small) workplaces and enterprises, a real understanding of the working life, a reform of the procedures of working organisations, a new kind of cooperation between enterprises, authorities and experts and comprehensive vision, high-quality information, openness, confidence, interaction, mutual respect and appreciation (Figure 1, Manninen 2000a).

Besides the changes described above, namely the age structure of the personnel and other individual factors, fitness for work and job satisfaction also depend on many factors related to the job and working environment: working under adverse conditions or using unsuitable procedures may accelerate the deterioration of our performance and fitness for work, while working under favourable conditions and using right procedures may have the opposite effect.

The key question is how know-how concerning fitness for work and the application of new information can be improved at workplaces and how training can help people at
workplaces to make their work more sensible and inspiring, to make the workplace a place where they like to work and that does not injure ageing workers or accelerate the deterioration of their fitness for work.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO 1993) there are two ways to postpone retirement. One involves the employees and the other the employers. Employers should change the work tasks to reduce the loading factors involved in the work. Employees, in turn, should maintain their fitness for work by health-promoting activity such as regular fitness exercise.

The results of a recent study in the textile and clothing industry also provide some convincing evidence that the effects of factors leading to earlier retirement may be considerably alleviated by ensuring that the work tasks assigned to aging employees are sensible. This is an important consideration, since the results of the study also indicate that both managers and employees find the sensibility of their work an equally important incentive as economic incentives when considering how long they want to keep working (Manninen 2000b, Manninen 2001).

Keeping senior workers employed and appreciating and utilising their experience and expertise should be in everyone’s interests and is reflected in the maintenance of know-how in enterprises, continuity of operation and better quality of products. To maximise the benefits workplaces should actively look for suitable measures for promoting the fitness for work of aging workers. As our findings show roughly only every tenth small company (8 %) has taken measures to promote the older workers’ ability (Figure 2). The main point here is that the willingness of the older workers to keep working seems to depend essentially on whether measures to promote the fitness for work of older workers have been carried out at the workplace (Figure 3, Manninen 2000b).

Besides measures to promote the high ability and fitness for work of aging workers, companies and their personnel also need on-site training enhanced by media and demonstrations as well as comprehensive information on the maintenance of physical and mental fitness, on proven practices and the design of work cells and tasks. To avoid re-doing what others have already done, workplaces should also learn to learn from each others, as well as from various experts and authorities.

A term often associated with the advent of the information society is the information superhighway, which mainly includes Internet-based networks where most of the contents is in English. Contrary to the general assumption our recent studies have shown that information networks are not particularly useful in daily development work even in companies that are comfortable with computers and e-mail. This finding is at least partly explained by the fact that the most of the available information is written in a foreign language, but it is also often irrelevant, illogical and sporadic, and the sheer amount of information may be overwhelming (Manninen and Talonen 2001). The FourFive- project takes this trend into account by creating a central information and information production base on the project’s web pages.

To encourage people to use the base on a regular basis the project’s web pages (network publications) will be designed to be so logical and easy to use that people trained at the workplaces will notice that they can to retrieve the information they need in a quick, easy and pleasant way without frustrations or extra strain.
Target groups

The target group consists of enterprises and their personnel representing five sectors: textile and clothing industry, shoes and leather industry, construction, public transportation, electrification and HVAC enterprises. The enterprises and personnel participating in the training are faced with radical structural changes in their operating environment. Working and operating in the middle of changes requires special commitment and input. For this reason the support in training and development provided by project is allocated to these sectors.

This is the reason why the FourFive- project is going to bring school to the working community to be accessible to everybody, although the budget and calculation of costs necessitates selecting a special voluntary target group to receive the most attention and intensive monitoring. This selection is based on a questionnaire study, interviews and other such examinations as well as fitness tests.

Half of this group are male and half female, half are 45 or over and half under 45 years old (40-44). To ensure the best benefits, the study targets above all passive people with poor physical fitness and little exercise. A total of 500 employees of productive enterprises are selected for training and intensive monitoring. To attain the desired interactive and reflective impacts, an additional 50 persons representing expert and cooperation organizations are selected for training, thus the total number of the target group is 550 people. Because of possible drop-outs or non-starters, this is the minimum size of the target population to ensure the reliability and generalizability of the results.

Objectives

Even today the training and coaching at workplaces aimed at the development of the working life uncritically applies the same methods and procedures that are generally used in institutional and school-like education of young persons and other adult population. Training generally takes place in educational institutions far away from the workplaces and repeats the same old patterns without considering the trainees’ age or ability to learn new things or the size or resources of the company.

This approach can hardly be considered justified or ideal with a view to the effectiveness and economy of learning and education. It is also diametrically opposite to what the people at workplaces themselves find the most suitable and efficient way for them to get education. The results of our latest research projects show that the people at workplaces desire to get training and education related to ageing as in-house training at the workplace and that the training should be enhanced using modern media and demonstrations as well as illustrative examples.

People wish that the school could come to the workplace. While the training should take place as close to the company and the trainees as possible, and should demonstrate a high level of expertise and correspond to the needs of the companies and individuals, it should also be interesting and should be arranged during normal working hours. The education should be sufficiently entertaining that people would want to participate in it. With a view to the permanent effects to be attained, the training should also be arranged as long-term and coordinated operation lasting several years.
The objectives of the fourteen different schools included in the project can be summarized as follows.

1. Developing and creating such new procedures and modes of operation that are useful and necessary, that are fun to participate in and that impart such a positive attitude that it alone encourages the adult trainees to learn and inspires them to maintain their good fitness for work. The point is that gladness and optimism induces commitment, promotes favourable attitudes and has in every respect a more favourable effect than forced and strictly matter-of-fact toiling.

2. In accordance with the project's basic objective, by the end of the project those who participated in the training programs had the benefit of both improved fitness and better ability to cope with their daily work tasks compared to the initial situation (for example, the improved oxygen intake has contributed to a radical improvement of the originally poor fitness). One special partial objective was to induce and encourage passive individuals used to a low level of exercise to take care of their health and fitness during their leisure by increasing their level of exercise in a safe way. For this purpose the project has to develop tools and methods that enable individuals themselves to monitor the development of their fitness and evaluate the significance of the changes they have observed.

3. The project in general encourages both companies and their staff to develop working environments and the work to a more ergonomic direction, which makes is easier for the aging employees to perform their work. The objective is to develop both procedures as well as rehabilitating, recreating and preventive activities to take place during the working hours to reduce work-induced stress and physical and mental loads.

4. The project endeavours to change the atmosphere of the participating working communities into more positive direction where the constant learning and know-how of employees are appreciated and they will be motivated to continue their work with enthusiasm and efficiency as long as possible. A related partial objective is to develop human relations skills (interaction and management practices including information management and incentive travel), so that by the end of the project the companies will have established their procedures for inquiring the employees' views, listening to them and giving them adequate feedback.

5. The project develops training in terms of procedures, techniques and contents in order to take into account the special characteristics of that people of various ages, such as adults, aging, and aged people.

6. An essential part of the continuous development of the project is considering the views on in-house training presented by the managers and employees of different types of companies.

7. During the project both aging people and the people who are next in line to become aging at the workplaces are trained to use information networks. One concrete step in attaining this objective is improving the readiness of enterprises and employees to search and use new information on the maintenance of fitness for work and performance by ensuring that at least half of the persons and enterprises that participated in the program have acquired personal computers and know how to navigate in information networks. A part of the multi-channel training program is gathering basic information for future projects.
on the significance and need to develop the use of information networks in the specific context of this type of campaigns and contents (fitness for work) and the special characteristics of the target group (the sectors and enterprises involved).

8. To maximize the benefits the project aims at setting up an example of a natural, successful and permanent way to cooperate regionally with the enterprises, working communities, local experts and authorities of the target group. This calls for developing cooperation, mutual interaction between small and big enterprises and procedures for learning from each other and exchanging proven practices and examples.

9. During the project each participant company will be assigned a high ability program, which will be part of the company's quality system and personnel training program. The senior program will help enterprises to take better care of their aging employees.

*As a whole the realization of the objectives requires some completely new procedures that can be used simultaneously and in parallel. Ultimately the learning and adopting of new things requires that the people involved use the same language, appreciate each other, find joy in their work and learn a new kind of interaction.*

**Innovative means**

The innovative training methods include a story market, business olympics, demonstrations, incentive travels and trips, in-house training at workplaces enhanced by media and demonstrations, mass communication as well as sector and company specific personal communication with related a information base and network experts.

*In-house training at workplaces*

The project's motto is that school comes to the workplace. This takes place simultaneously by three different routes: activity at the workplace, demonstration and exhibition activities, and media operations. The training is arranged in the form of a multi-channel training that combines individual tutoring, instruction in small groups, lectures, demonstrations and exhibitions as well as local and distance learning using the media and information networks. This offers a way to eliminate obstacles that might prevent people from attending to the training and ensure that the trainees will really learn. The contents of the training are grouped into fourteen sub-projects that are called modules or schools. As a rule the training programs contain things that the personnel in companies themselves find necessary and topical.

Of course, the contents of the programs may vary or may be weighted differently according to the sector that the company represents.

*Central information and information production base*

A common information and information production base is created to ensure unproblematic utilization and updates of information in the project. The information base will have data on the major Finnish and foreign producers of information in the field, research results, applications and examples of proven practices. The lectures and reports
of the conferences and Development forum arranged in connection with the project will be edited and published in the central information and information production base. The basic idea of the information base is that it should correspond to the information and development needs of the target group companies as closely as possible. The point is in summarizing, interpreting and gathering information written in different languages and dispersed in various databases into one central location, where it is easily available to whoever should need such information. The information will be edited in Finnish and made easy to understand. All information can be retrieved from the project's web page.

**Personal and mass communication**

Communication plays a central role in arousing the interest of the general public and in influencing attitudes and in the general development activities at the workplace. The objective of the personal and mass communication in the project is to transmit information about measures to promote people's fitness for work and to motivate target group and other employers and employees of the companies committed to the project. The project's web pages also offer the services of a net doctor and net expert, who will without delay answer all questions pertaining to the fitness for work and health of the project participants with an open and encouraging approach.

**Project contents and fields of information**

The FourFive- project perceives the high ability and overall fitness for work as an opportunity for aging employees to perform their work well. High ability to work is reflected in good workmanship and product. High-quality work is in everybody's interests. It also encourages aging employees to continue working.

In this broader perspective people's high ability to work is affected not only by their physical and mental fitness but also many factors related to their occupation, environment, personality and community: knowledge and skills, leisure, family life, working community and environment, work, values and attitudes.

A person's combined ability to work can be improved by developing each of these areas.

The project has an individualistic and problem-oriented approach, which means that the information, measures and development objectives that have the main weight in the training and guidance are those that the personnel of the target group companies themselves consider topical, necessary and useful. On the basis of the investigations and basic charting to be carried out during the project (inquiries, interviews and observations) the contents of the training programs are differentiated slightly depending on the sector and company type in question.

As a rule the training programs contain things that the employees themselves find topical and necessary. The contents are developed to correspond to the trainee's level of fitness, as well as the special requirements and features of each sector and type of work. Trainers specialized in ergonomics, fitness and working communities and a physician will together with the other project personnel use various means to identify the training and development needs of the working communities, to set objectives and to ensure their attainment.
For instance, the results of our study reveal that in the opinion of the employees of the textile and clothing sector the most fields of information that would benefit both the managers and the employees most are age and physical fitness, as well as age and mental fitness. Managers consider the next most useful fields of information to be age and expertise, age and performance, age and learning. Next to fitness-related information, employees consider the most useful fields of information to be age and work cell design, age and expertise, and age and proven practices at workplaces. Moreover, exercise during breaks and exercise for recovery are considered the best, the promotion of ergonomics the second best, and the shortening of the daily working hours the third best way to promote the job satisfaction and performance of aging employees.

**Benefits of the FourFive-project**

It is a well-known fact that a competitive company is the best guarantee of the livelihood of the employees and their families. By taking care of their skilled and experienced employees a company ultimately secures the continuity of its own operation.

For example, maintaining the high ability of the oldest skilled workers of a workplace so that they can keep on working three or four years longer than they intended means an annual savings of hundreds of thousands of marks per one employee. As the enterprises participating in this project engage in a goal-oriented and long-term development of suitable measures for promoting the fitness for work, improve the preconditions of productive work and encourage their employees to take care of their physical fitness, the employees understand that the employer is genuinely interested in their health, well-being and skills. This, in turn, increases the personnel’s motivation and commitment to the company’s operation. In the course of time, the employees’ initiative increases and their interest in the development of their working environment and working community increases and reaches a stable level, absenteeism, sickness leaves and turnover of labour decrease, flexibility and openness increase, skills and know-how improve, the utilization rate of new information rises, and the profitability and competitiveness of the company improves.

As the human resources of a company increase, its competitiveness and employment potential improve. The project implementation for its parts serves to secure the fitness for work and availability of labour in the Pirkanmaa (Tampere) region. Since modern information and communication technology play key roles in the project, the project is also linked to the development of the information society in Pirkanmaa.

The improvement of a company’s competitiveness, in turn, is reflected in the improved identity, togetherness and well-being of the personnel. It also results in more positive attitudes and more joy, which encourages the employees to assume personal responsibility and gives them confidence in the future.

**Research activities**

By the simultaneous and parallel use of new methods the project aims at producing permanent effects on the target group. However, the realization of the set goals and the relevance, applicability and generalizability of different development and training operations cannot be proven without a well-planned, organized, professional and continuous collection of feedback and other such data. Therefore, the entire long-term
coordinated operation of the FourFive-project is based on a thorough analysis and identification of the development needs at the sector, company and personal levels.

The total duration of the project is crucial for the desired permanent effects. As the results of the Milliards Game project implemented in the Central Finland revealed, three years is the minimum duration of a project that aims at influencing people's attitudes, changing their health habits and behaviour and launching various workplace-level development actions (Manninen et al 1998).

The long span and related continuous research and evaluation processes are particularly necessary to ensure the effectiveness of new training and coaching methods that are proven to be suitable for and appeal to aging workers. For this reason the FourFive-project emphasizes the collection and analysis of information. As the project endeavours to keep aging employees healthy, productive and committed, the collection and analysis of information are mainly applied to evaluating how this central objective has been attained and how suitable the used methods have been.

Information of special interest to researchers and relevance to practical application is also produced by the innovative products of the project such as the story market events, business olympics, incentive travels, business clinics and information production base. At present, no such detailed information on the applicability and effectiveness of these means in projects concerned with fitness for work and performance is available in Finland or elsewhere.

Expanding the FourFive-project

Excellent preconditions for the expansion already exist, for example, due to the fact that the implementers of the project have already produced standardised questionnaires. They apply to five sectors under radical structural changes and the office work done in these sectors. A questionnaire with a similar structure and items has already been used for gathering information in the preliminary studies in 1999 from productive enterprises of the textile and clothing sector in the Päijät-Häme and Kanta-Häme regions (Manninen 2000b).

The interest of the enterprises in the project is reflected in the fact that already at that time several companies of the textile and clothing sector expressed their willingness to participate should a project for promoting the high ability of ageing employees ever be launched.

References


Manninen O (2000a) Means to promote the fitness for work and job satisfaction of the older workers. Arch Complex Environ Studies 12(3-4)2000


Figure 1. CHALLENGES POSED BY AGEING

To cope with the general challenges posed by ageing in the near future, we need not only

Multidisciplinary research that takes complex working and living conditions into account but also

- a genuine interest in the operation of (especially small) workplaces and enterprises,
- a real understanding of the working life,
- a reform of the procedures of working organisations,
- a new kind of cooperation between enterprises, authorities and experts,
- a comprehensive vision, high-quality information, openness, confidence, interaction, mutual respect and appreciation.
Figure 2. Companies that have taken measures to promote the older workers' fitness for work on the basis of company size*

*FourFive sector inquiry: the shoe and leather sector, the public transportation sector, the building sector, the building service sector
Figure 3. Willingness of senior workers at workplaces to keep on working in enterprises of different sizes according to realized measures to promote fitness for work (the clothing and textile sector; all respondents)

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Willingness to keep working