



WP2.3 Synthesis Report from In-depth Interviews

All partner countries

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Introduction

Six partner organizations from five European countries – Bulgaria, Finland, German, Poland, and Slovenia have cooperated to implement the Erasmus+ project “Silver Grow - career guidance and digital education for senior workers in enterprises”. The aim of the project is to provide a complex model of services for senior workers to support their potential on the labor market.

Part of the Silver Grow project activities in Work Package n°2 - Forum group for the exchange of ideas and practices, includes a conduct of in-depth interviews in each partner countries with 25 employers and 25 employees in total.

The aim of the in-depth interviews was to gain a rough insight into the practice of companies in the occupational integration of employees 50+. The interview results provided initial findings into the challenges, needs, expectations and barriers in the fields of action of company culture, personnel leadership, personnel management, digital transformation, work organization, health as well as innovation and knowledge transfer. The Silver Grow partnership is going to utilize the findings from the in-depth interviews when defining senior workers support measures.

Overview on In-dept Interviews

Process of In-depth Interviews

The process of conducting in-depth interviews held between June – August 2023 in Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Poland, and Slovenia. The interviews were held in person or online and their length was between 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Profile of the participants

The profile of participants includes people aged 50 years and over, coming from private or public micro, SMEs, and big companies. Most of the companies were SMEs. All participants have over 2 years of work, except for one person, who stated to have 10 months of work experience. The interviewees were both male and female, with prevail of female participants. Their educational level includes people who have a PhD, master, or bachelor degree from universities, but also people with secondary and vocational educational level.

Sectors per countries

There are a variety of sectors in which the in-depth interviews’ respondents have been worked. For the different countries these sectors are outlined as follow:

- Bulgaria: Education, state government and self-government, trade, construction, recycling, accountancy and consultations, tax refund, and business supporting NGOs.
- Finland: Health and social services, IT services, industrial production sectors: metal, food, chemical processes.
- Germany: Automation technology, metal processing, services, education, and insurance.
- Poland: Education, administration, sports, IT, and medical.
- Slovenia: IT, pharmaceutical, video production, robotics and 3D tools construction industry, telecommunication, education, and government sector.

Field of Actions

There were seven predefined fields of actions by the partnership, which were in the focus during the in-depth interviews:

- Corporate Culture
- Leadership
- Personal Management
- Digital Transformation
- Work Organization
- Health
- Innovation and knowledge transfer

When interviewing the employers and employees aged 50+, the partners in the project selected at least three of the predefined field of actions.

Issues to be Identified

It was planned that the results from interviews will give partnership information about several aspects related to the workers 50+ like key advantages and barriers to employ senior workers, the knowledge concerning consulting tools that support employability, main reasons for the employee deficit, needs of senior workers connected with gaining of knowledge in digitalization, etc. Thus, the partners decided the focus of in-depth interviews to fall on the following five issues:

- Challenges Faced Regarding the Target Group
- Needs of the Target Group
- Target Group's Expectations Associated with Meeting the Needs
- Existing Obstacles to Overcome
- Specific Observations and Conclusions.

There were a variety of responses and examples provided by interviewees. The next sections provide a summary of the most common responses and findings.

Challenges Faced Regarding the Target Group

Corporate culture

The challenges outlined by most of the interviewees with reference to corporate culture could be summarized in the following ascertains:

- The existence of biases, prejudice and stereotypes related to 50+ workers.
- Lack of culture that recognizes and value diversity of different age groups.
- Discrimination for employees 50+ in recruitment, promotion, or training opportunities.
- Lack of a diverse, welcoming environment for training and collaboration of people of all ages.
- Lack of a unified approach to age integration in companies.

- Lack of encouraging atmosphere towards equal treatment at work and non-discrimination based on the age.
- The “habitus issue”, that is, the differences between seniors (with high working motivation) and the younger generation which the seniors called ‘egoism culture’ indicating a need of more equality among the generations.

Leadership and HRM

- A challenge with leadership refers to finding the right balance between respecting the experience of employees 50+ and encouraging innovation.
- People 50+ are sometimes not positive about changes in performance, management, etc., so they need to be motivated by leadership and given time to make changes.
- Challenges related to having authority over older employees or trainees who are at the age of managers’ parents.
- (Younger) managers are not always but have to be sensitized to employees 50+ and their potential.
- Insufficient respect and acknowledgement of 50+ employees’ work by the management.
- Lack of consideration for employees over 50 in some companies, where employees aged 50+ feel overlooked or not included in management and organizational development processes.
- It is also sometimes challenging to find the right way to measure the performance of older employees, as they don’t always reflect the right amount of their contributions.
- Regarding leadership, the seniors called for a deeper understanding of their needs to learn new things in their own way and more overthought teaching and learning processes.
- Challenges with communication: sometimes it is challenging for people aged 50+ to work and communicate with younger generations as they have different styles of collaboration.

Digital transformation

- Digitization is one of the most significant challenges for modern companies, evoking the need for the employees to adapt to the digitization of the workplace.
- The seniors find the fast development of IT a big challenge being hard to keep up with.
- Training is a crucial component of digitalization and employees’ self-improvement. However, employees have reservations when dealing with entirely new area of knowledge covered by the training.
- The older employees tend to acquire new knowledge more slowly and with greater difficulty than their younger counterparts. Thus, the ‘senior-specific’ training models should be developed, including more personalized learning methods considering seniors’ mentality and emotionality.

Work Organization

- Insufficient Introduction of flexible work options such as flextime, remote work, or part-time hours, which are seen as a way to enable older workers to remain productive in their jobs while meeting their own individual needs.
- Lack of Job (re)design i.e., creating specific roles that suit their abilities, adjusting job responsibilities, or reducing workload.
- Absence of workstation ergonomic (re)design to prevent higher risk of musculoskeletal issues in older people.

- Lack of clear overall procedures in organizing the seniors' work leading also to challenges related to the division of work and workload in the teams.

Health:

- Many companies, especially SMEs, have not yet invested sufficiently in the ergonomic design of their workplaces, that have negative effects on the health, performance, and well-being of employees 50+.
- The individual illness histories of employees 50+ are not always known to HR managers. Illnesses can develop over a longer period of time and for reasons of data protection many employees 50+ do not speak openly about their health problems.
- Impact of psychosocial factors (e.g., dealing with stress) and the promotion of a work-life balance.
- Challenges associated with the timely recognition of health risks, employer collaboration, and raising the companies' awareness about preventive healthcare as economically profitable activities.

Innovation and transfer of knowledge

- The main challenge is viewed in the lack of systematic knowledge transfer mechanism and concrete methods of identifying tacit knowledge. There seems to be a need for a more holistic attitude of diversity management where the seniors could play an important role.

Needs of the Target Group

Corporate culture

- There is a great need in companies to establish age management.
- The corporate culture needs to recognize age diversity.
- There still is a need for better recognition of the seniors' professional experience as well as the existing knowledge. The need will be growing along with the labor shortage.

Leadership and HRM

- Understanding of the need to have a better work-life balance for the 50+ employees for which family - care obligations increased.
- Need for personal training, including for creation of digital skills, and professional development.
- Need for a job security as finding new job at that age might be challenging.
- Expressed need by the employees 50+ to be considered as an example and to share the knowledge acquired during their long tenure and extensive industry experience.
- The need for strengthening the position of the HR seen as an important role in organizing training and succession planning. The HR managers emphasized developing inclusive recruiting models.
- Need to keep the valuable knowledge and skills of older workforce, even where they are not working in the company anymore. Therefore, it is needed to have effective succession planning and knowledge transfer strategies in place to address this issue.

Work Organization

- Individual work organization is closely related to the nature of the job and the company, i.e., whether it requires strict adherence to a certain number of hours and work schedule or allows flexibility, part-time, or remote work. The employees aged 50+ need more flexibility and prefer part-time work, including the retired ones, while the youngers, especially parents, are more inclined to opt for remote work.
- There is a clear need for developing versatile work arrangements like job rotation, job enrichment and possibilities to apply for other jobs inside the company as well as arrangements enabling individual modifications of work.
- It is important to have an age-neutral approach when it comes to work organization, so that it fits to employees of all ages.

Health

- Need for ergonomic and age-appropriate workplace design. Employees 50+ may experience health or physical limitations with increasing the age. A working environment that is tailored to the health situation of employees 50+ should help to facilitate their everyday working life and minimize health burdens.
- Need for offering exercise programs or nutritional counseling as well as health and wellness programs inside and outside of the workplace (i.e., subsidized gym memberships and medical examinations).
- The need for medical services may vary between workplaces but for the majority of cases there are no special age-related programs.
- Regular health check-ups were seen pivotal and cost-effective, and more information about health at the age of seniors is needed.

Knowledge transfer

- More conscious models of knowledge management and methods of tacit knowledge identification were announced both by the seniors and the HR managers.

Target Group's Expectations

Target group's expectations associated with meeting their needs in the observed fields of actions include the following main points:

Corporate culture

- Employees 50+ expect an appreciative company culture in which they and their skills are recognized, respected, and appreciated, including in the context of working with the younger generation.
- They expect regular feedback mechanisms that lead to a constructive communicative exchange (also across generations).
- Expect company culture that promotes the necessary attitudes, values, and attitudes in dealing with employees 50+.

Leadership and HRM

- Employees 50+ expect individual care and support from management.
- They want an open and trusting working relationship with their superiors in which their needs and expectations are adequately considered.
- It was emphasized the need to pass on the professional knowledge of employees 50+ to younger generations, e.g., by means of mentoring programs.
- Employees 50+ also expect a positive effect in the opposite direction by learning from younger employees (e.g., in the course of digital transformation).
- Regarding the leadership, a better recognition of the seniors' work was again brought up and the HR managers expect the quality of the leadership to develop in collaboration with supporting the seniors.
- The HR expectations focus on more profound, more holistic (work-life balance) and comprehensive support for the retirement process.

Digital transformation

- The expectation regarding the IT development brings up a need for support seniors in the learning process, better understanding of the document management and a need for higher training on IT themes.

Work Organization

- The most prominent expectation expressed by the workers is the want to work after reaching retirement age, i.e., to make it possible by the employers through work reorganization and part-time involvement.
- Introducing measures to mitigate consequences of the work "burnout."
- The balance between work and other life should be taken into account.
- The theme of encouraging the expression of opinions was seen important.
- Expectations for more time to recover from the workload and methods of work easement are called for.

Health

- Employees aged 50+ have clear expectations for measures that promote their health and well-being at work.
- The close involvement of employees 50+ in the development of future health initiatives.
- Companies must recognize that employees 50+ also have diverse individual needs and expectations.
- Introduction of comprehensive healthcare benefits by companies, to attract and retain talented individuals across all age groups.

Innovation and transfer of knowledge

- Seniors call for clearer process and building up a toolkit for that.
- The process of succession planning should start early enough.

Existing Barriers and Obstacles to Overcome

Corporate culture

- A major hurdle in the field of action of company culture is the reduction of stereotypes and prejudices towards employees 50+.
- Another hurdle is the possible lack of a company's vision regarding age diversity.
- The goal of making profit and “making money” is seen as a potential obstacle for investing in the seniors.
- The continuous change in IT technologies as well as the exclusion of the seniors from the decision making are seen as obstacles.

Leadership and HRM

- Managers often do not have sufficient understanding of the needs of employees 50+ which can lead to insufficient support and adaptation of conditions in everyday work.
- Employees 50+ are often not sufficiently supported in the context of personnel development or are included in further training not tailored to their needs.
- There is often lack of understanding by HR managers regarding the learning behavior of employees 50+. This concerns, among other things, the use of new technologies.
- The lack of time and that the senior theme is not necessarily the focal theme on the leaders' table is also seen as an obstacle.
- Obstacles with older workers who might be more resistant to change, especially if they have been accustomed to certain ways of doing things for a long time. Effective change management strategies can help address this resistance.

Work Organization

- The seniors see that the generation issue mentioned earlier might be an obstacle. The younger workers' attitudes may be critical regarding the seniors.
- The HR managers see time allocation as a key issue.

Health

- The most serious obstacle detected is the lack of money. The cost for investing in health measures start running immediately while the positive outcomes turn out only later.
- In particular, the necessary financial resources (especially for SMEs) to invest in ergonomic and age-appropriate workplace equipment is seen as an obstacle.
- Measures for stress management tend to be neglected.
- Data protection is also a hurdle, especially when it comes to collecting and processing personal health data.

Innovation and transfer of knowledge

- The seniors assess that the short-term management and pressures on financial targets constitute an obstacle especially if the managers do not see the value of the senior support.

Conclusions

The insights from interviews with employers regarding employees aged 50+ highlight certain differences between industries, as well as **common patterns**:

- *Value of Experience:* In many industries such as IT and education, experienced employees aged 50+ are still highly valued. Employers appreciate their knowledge and skills, which significantly contribute to the company's development. Therefore, in these industries age is not the primary criterion in recruitment or promotions.
- *Age Integration:* Many companies in the private and public sector, particularly those in the industries related to new technologies, have only rudimentarily dealt with the topic of "age management in companies". Thus, the need for action to promote the professional integration of employees 50+ in companies is (still) too little recognized at all levels. However, companies start to admit that intergenerational cooperation can lead to innovation and better utilization of diverse employee skills.
- *Active Measures:* Some companies take active steps to integrate employees aged 50+ and manage age differences as part of their HR strategy. This includes tailoring training programs to different age groups and promoting an atmosphere of respect and equality.
- *Lack of Uniform Approach:* Despite the overall recognition of the value of employees aged 50+, there are still companies that do not take action toward integrating different age groups. This can lead to communication and understanding issues between generations.
- *Industry Differences:* Differences between industries are noticeable. In industries where there is a constant need for knowledge updates, such as IT, older employees may be more valued for their deep knowledge. In sectors that rely on ongoing mentorship and knowledge transfer, such as education, experienced teachers are invaluable as mentors for the new generation.

In terms of observed field of actions, during the interviews there were identified specific challenges and needs of employees aged 50+ that will require additional **measures** to address them:

- **In the field of corporate culture:** It is noted that employees 50+ are often confronted with prejudices and stereotypes at workplaces that lead to age discrimination. Raising awareness of the value of employees 50+ and creating a company culture in which age diversity is firmly anchored are important measures.
- **In the field of leadership,** it can be observed that a lack of individual counselling, care, and support for employees 50+ is a complex challenge. Managers need to be sensitized to this target group.
- **In the field of human resource management,** the value of employees aged 50+ is acknowledged in many industries, but there are differences in approaches to age integration and age diversity management that can impact the workplace atmosphere and long-term success of the company.
- **In the field of health,** the measures should be aimed at introduction of ergonomic and age-appropriate workplace design, regular health check-ups, wellness programs inside and outside of the workplace and nutritional counseling.



- Employees 50+ are not always adequately supported and integrated into further training measures. Especially during the **digital transformation**, there is a need for training to build digital skills and learn how to use new technologies. In addition, the needs of employees 50+ must be taken more into account in the development, planning and organization of further training programmes.

In summary, the interviews show that from the point of view of employers and employees - regardless of company size and sectors - there is an acute need to (further) improve the professional integration of employees 50+. The goal is better exploitation of the potential of senior workers in future, also with a view to digital transformation, company innovation and knowledge management and the establishment of an appreciative company culture and leadership.

The interviews indicate the core themes proved by the experts in the field may now be taken into account in creating the fast path. **The main messages** seem to be twofold:

First, the interviews clearly indicate that supporting seniors in their late careers and retirement, is not a theme that could be easily addressed or tackled by taking any individual theme separately (organization culture, health, work arrangements, etc.) as a starting point. All the core themes are intertwined and interconnected. This is a clear message of the interviews. That is why we came to the idea of 360-degree approach and the “ecology of senior support (services)”.

The second conclusion that is apparent in the interviews is a demand for more participatory approaches and methodologies when developing the seniors’ support. The seniors felt very often that they do not have their say when decisions are made on the support mechanisms or the methods that are used, e.g., in training them. The call for more authentic dialogue seems to be obvious. Maybe the fast path could be conceptualized as creating an ecology of dialogical spaces of senior support.

Aknowledgement

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Annexes

- Annex 1: Bulgaria Report on Interviews
- Annex 2: Finland Report on Interviews
- Annex 3: Germany Report on Interviews
- Annex 4: Poland Report on Interviews
- Annex 5: Slovenia Report on Interviews