

# BEST AGERS ACTIVATION TOOLBOX – RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

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## Introduction

In recent years, the fact to make more use of the knowledge and expertise of people aged 55+ years – called “Best Ager” – has been increasingly recognized. The usage of these skills is becoming more and more important. Due to this finding, the number of projects concerning Best Ager as the target group (supported by different financial means providers) has risen in the early past.

In contrast, deficits are observed in how the use of this knowledge is managed. Therefore, to organize this process more professionally and offer motivated Best Ager the opportunity to pass on their knowledge must be of higher importance. This would ensure quality and sustainability in this area.

In the Strategic Baltic Sea Region project “Best Ager” the research association Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania was responsible for development of “Best Ager Activation Toolbox”. The planned toolbox should help:

- to identify Best Ager who possess skills and knowledge needed and get in contact with them;
- to motivate them to participate in intergenerational transfer of human capital;
- to motivate them to become entrepreneurs themselves;
- to acquire Best Ager as volunteers and “social entrepreneurs”;
- to complement their existing skills with those needed to contribute to the intergenerational transfer or human capital.

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Consequently, on the one hand this toolbox is intended for use in institutions and organizations which already offer opportunities for voluntary work, to accelerate the addition of further volunteers and/or give even better support to those already active, e.g. with further training opportunities. On the other, it will assist institutions without volunteer workers in entering in this field and provide a suitable basic toolkit for conceptualizing such opportunities and gaining volunteers.

## **1. Limitations and Collection of Data**

For data collection a group of 458 Best Ager was interviewed. This was done with respect to the use of sought-after knowledge of well-educated and experienced 55+ year-olds. It was decided to focus on the group of Best Ager with tertiary qualifications.

In the light of the international context, cultural similarities and differences in the topic areas to be investigated are also of high interest. For that reason, data collection by means of a questionnaire was carried out in Germany as well as in Poland, and Latvia; from the beginning of April until the end of July in 2010. 458 persons have been reviewed: 53% women, 47% men. The interviewed persons belonged to the age group 55 to 65 years. Almost every other of these persons is full-time employed, while around every fourth is already retired.

## **2. Module “Identification”**

### **How to inform yourself**

The identification of Best Ager, who are suitable and willing to do voluntary work, seems to be one of the difficulties for social organizations and agencies. The study participants have been asked where they would look for already available information on the possibilities of voluntary work.

As one result it became clear that especially the internet and print media – in example magazines, post cards, calendars, posters and flyer – are seen in the foreground of the information use.

If Best Ager are already equipped with basic knowledge about voluntary work, the question is which way do Best Ager choose to obtain information about volunteering. It came up that the interviewed mentioned especially personal conversations and inquiries via e-mail. Every third also regarded own inquiries by telephone as a way to get information. The most important aspect of this first contact is the creation of confidence. Therefore, the responsible person in the organization should be prepared well for these personal conversations.

The same value as for personal conversations, showed up in the interview, is also for getting into contact via e-mail. To meet the special importance, the process of this e-mail inquiry has to be thought out well and presented clearly in the organization.

For every third of the interviewees enquiries by telephone to organizers and providers of voluntary work is conceivable. Being well prepared the possibility to

leave a good impression in this area is quite feasible. In the best case, more concrete activities will be arranged with the Best Ager.

### **Announcement of Offers**

If Best Ager are interested in doing voluntary work, they're looking for suitable offers that correspond to their skills and could be fun for them.

According to that a majority of the study participants regarded especially through personal contacts in well-known focal points, placement web-portals and ads in the news and magazines are suitable. A minority voted for personal letters and newsletters.

### **Web-Portals**

Obviously, there is a request for a clearly structured presentation of offers and a user-friendly, uncomplicated procedure. Furthermore, a large majority requests sophisticated opportunities to search and narrow down results, a proof of safety and respectability of the web-portal as well as low loading times while looking at the offers.

More than every second of the interviewed evaluates a high number of offers important for the user. Short films or rather photos about offered voluntary work appear less pronounced.

### **Exchange of Experiences on Voluntary Work**

Interviewees especially named the own family, circle of friends and circle of acquaintances as well as the partner in this context.

## **3. Module “Motivation” concerning Voluntary Work**

### **Interest**

The situation among the interviewees concerning voluntary and unpaid work in honorary office is quite clear as 75% of the study participants actually are not active in this field. However, around one third has planned to engage in future. Additionally, there are huge differences between the countries individuals came from.

### **Scale**

There is quite a high potential as half of the interviewed are interested in voluntary work, the possible intensity for this kind of work is of high significance for the planning of corresponding offers.

In the evaluation it turns out that around one half of the interested people are willing to work voluntarily for two to five days per month. Here are some huge differences between single countries again.

Around two-thirds want to invest two to five hours a day for volunteer work, whereas around a quarter would work for only one hour a day. 10% of the people would in fact work for more than five hours per day.

## Areas

The opportunities to work as Best Ager voluntarily are large. To find out the importance of certain fields, the interviewees could name areas where they would like to get involved in future or where they are already active. Afterwards it appeared that the maintenance area of indigenous culture and tradition as well as the support of older people who are in need of help is favored by every fourth of the surveyed. Additional points that have been mentioned were leisure activities with children and young persons as well as the environmental and animal protection.

Further mentioned fields are respective professional areas, assisting in senior, patient and sport organization as well as student unions, legal assistance, mediation, homeless assistance, adult education and science, activities for rural areas, support for founders of a new business, community policy, support the "Third World" or the Red Cross. Again, there are large differences between the single countries.

## Reflection

For the identification suitable Best Ager, it's important to know what aspects could motivate them to reflect on voluntary work.

1. The personal address by acquaintances, friends, family and present or former work colleagues is favored by the majority of the interviewees regarding the question whom to contact with the thoughts about voluntary work.
2. Roughly half of the study participants pointed out the importance to address Best Ager volunteers via interesting articles in newspapers. Special attention should be paid to public relations. With the help of these tools the users should be able to plan the area of public relations in their own organization.
3. Every third of the interviewees named special actions like a fair for volunteers as a reason to think about voluntary work.
4. While 50% of the interviewed regarded online placement channels as the best way for interested Best Ager to get in contact with voluntary work, only one out of every five considered the knowledge of an online placement channel as a suitable occasion to think about voluntary work.
5. Every fourth of the interviewees agreed that an offered financial compensation in terms of travel and catering expenses should be offered and motivates Best Ager to be active in voluntary work.
6. This aspect should become a part of the effect that costs are examined in the conception process of the possibilities for voluntary work.

## Decisions

In the previous section we dealt with the question what's the best way to arouse the interest of Best Ager. In the following section the focus is on factors that are important to enable the already interested Best Ager to speed up their decisions.

1. The decision to be active voluntarily could be easier for Best Ager if they get in contact with people that benefit from doing voluntary work.

2. Similar to e-commerce activities in the internet (e.g. ebay), ratings and comments from active volunteers on providers of voluntary work could support the decision making process of Best Agers.
3. According to the survey results a large selection of voluntary work offers could support the Best Agers decisions concerning this employment opportunity.
4. It is important to develop a large number of different offers for volunteers within an organization and to establish a first contact with an interested Best Ager.
5. The publication of experience reports could make it easier for Best Agers to decide.
6. Hence, interested persons get an impression from the current activities. Furthermore, they could tackle this topic better.

#### **4. Module “Knowledge”**

##### **Important Knowledge and Skills**

At the beginning, the importance of specific knowledge and skills for voluntary work had to be assessed.

It stands out that in all three considered countries the so called soft skills – the ability of self-organisation and the ability to take the views and the interests of others into consideration – have been seen as (very) important in voluntary work. A large majority of the study participants regarded the interdisciplinary thinking as well as the presentation skills as essential. These and other predefined knowledge and skills were viewed differently depending on the country.

##### **Educational Needs**

Finally, interviewees have been asked to describe their personal education needs for present and future voluntary work.

While doing so, the interviewees estimated a need for education especially in the areas ability of self-organisation and foreign languages. One out of every five also mentioned the area of social competences and legal knowledge. Less need for education is seen in the remaining proposed areas. Overall, the assessment depends on a high range on the country.

In cases of proven scientific interest and for further analysis the collected data can be requested from the research association Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania.

#### **NARZĘDZIA AKTYWIZACJI OSÓB Z GRUPY *BEST AGERS* – WYNIKI BADAŃ**

W artykule przedstawiono najważniejsze wyniki badania dotyczącego aktywności osób w wieku 55+ w działalności wolontarystycznej, zrealizowanego w ramach Projektu *Best Agers – Using the knowledge and experience of professionals in their primes to foster business and skills development in the Baltic Sea Region*. Pełny raport z badania jest dostępny na stronie internetowej projektu: [www.best-agers-project.eu](http://www.best-agers-project.eu).