

BEST AGERS IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION – A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF EMPLOYERS’ ATTITUDES

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Introduction

The European Union has declared demographic change as one of the key challenges for European regions which increasingly affect various levels of society. Especially the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) characteristic is by an intensification multitude of demographic factors: population shrinkage, ageing of total and working-age population, migration of well-educated younger people (“brain-drain”) especially from rural areas pose a number of huge socio-economic challenges for both member states and actors on the regional level. This perspective is sustained by the potential negative scenario of decreasing labor supply which poses a threat for economic growth, competitiveness and wealth of the entire macro region. There is one important aim on behalf of the EU and its member states to achieve: to counteract these perceived negative economic effects of demographic change is to improve a labor market integration with a view to older workers.

An attempt to achieve this aim was made in the INTERREG IV-B project “Best Agers”²⁾ which has the goal to improve the age group 55+ (so called Best Agers) integration into labor markets, innovation processes and entrepreneurial activities in the BSR. Based on an analysis of the specific age structure in this region which many people 55–64 years old live in, the broad experiences and specific know-how of this age-group are highlighted and systematically explored. The potential benefits for employers and businesses as well as for Best Agers themselves shall be emphasized in order to increase their inclusion in working life, business and skills development.

In this regard, the article focuses on identifying the impact of demographic change on enterprises in six countries of the BSR: Denmark, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden. Employers’ attitudes towards older workers and the

¹⁾ REM Consult, www.rem-consult.eu/.

²⁾ www.best-agers-project.eu.

consequences of ageing workforces for businesses on the regional level are the main aim of analysis.

1. Methodology

Based on a transnationally applicable questionnaire, several qualitative case studies with enterprises (> 10 employees) in six BSR countries were initiated. The results allow to insight the challenges and problems which are described above. Furthermore, the aim of the survey was to sensitize employers and enterprises to ageing workforces and demographic challenges and to set off concrete measures to counteract related negative developments. In the respective studies, the response rate was low and samples differ according to their size. This fact indicates that conclusions must be treated with caution and results cannot be comprehensively compared, as well it is not necessarily representative. As comprehensive knowledge of the issue is lacking, the findings nonetheless allow for valuable insight in currently and upcoming demographic challenges of BSR enterprises on the regional scale. Table 1 shows the main features of the analysed companies.

Table 1. Structural data of participating enterprises

Country/Region	DE	DK	LT	LV	PL	SE
Share of SME ³⁾ (%)	93	100	92	66	92	47
Average number of employees	67	19	97	147	228	546
Share of companies with employees 55+ (%)	65	55	72	n.s.	54	76
Share of companies with employees 60+ (%)	53	40	43	n.s.	35	76
Share of companies with employees 65+ (%)	9	10	23	n.s.	8	32
Number of companies witch offer training course (%)	71	95	79	69	96	83
Estimated average age of labor force exit (years)	60	61	62	62	61	64

Source: author's own elaboration.

2. Results

The study reveals that enterprises in various regions of the BSR are affected by demographic transitions to differing degrees and with different implications, but basically on all business levels. Past and future awareness for demographic challenges varies among the enterprises, although there is quite a consensus that demography poses a huge future challenge. More precisely, the data shows a comprehensively growing relevance of demographic impact on all business levels and across all Baltic Sea countries. However, certain domains seem to be predomi-

³⁾ SME = small and medium sized enterprises with 10–49 (small) or 50–249 (medium) employees.

nantly important in this regard, such as “skill shortage” and “personal planning”. In Poland, “ergonomic infrastructure” and “age structure” stand out as well and “internal health-care” exhibits the strongest increase when comparing the past and future perception of demographic impact. In contrast, the indicators “strategic planning” and “work organization” are of small importance.

With regard to potential reasons for early retirement of older workers⁴⁾, health-related aspects comprehensively and by far are the most important reason according to the individual estimations of employers. It can be observed across countries and genders, whereas male employees are more often affected in this regard than women. However, the results have to be considered carefully: official statistics on the reasons of early labor force exit as well as the perspective of employees themselves should be considered as well in order to contrast employers' perspectives. Nevertheless the existing data allows for the conclusion that a stronger focus on ergonomic equipment, “age-specific” work tasks, health- and fitness-programs, but also a reduction of psychological burdens, stress and heavy working load are the questions which have to be reconsidered soundly. Regarding family-related reasons, a need for more flexible work structures and working time-concepts might be considered more prominently as well during debate about potential barriers for older workers who want to remain employed.

Furthermore, the report identifies gaps between perceived incentives for older workers in terms of longer and continued employment, and actual offers enterprises provide for their Best Ager. Summing up the main incentives for continued employment⁵⁾, “individually adjusted working time” as well as “individually adjusted work content”, and less coherently “economical incitements” constitute the most important aspects in order to attract longer employment of older workers. Equally, a “better social work environment” and – to a lesser degree – “health – and fitness-programs” are valued as highly relevant by employers in the BSR. Surprisingly, “competence development” or rather “career development” as well as “mentoring” seem not to bear a large importance in this regard. All in all, the comprehensively high relevance attributed to incentives dealing with self-determination regarding working-structure and – environment is peculiar. This finding supports the notion that soft incentives seem to appear as highly important in order to attract continued employment. On the other hand, economical incitements are estimated as extremely relevant on behalf of employers in some BSR countries, mostly the Baltic states. Further in-depth studies in the respective regions comparing perspectives from employers and workers might help to gain deeper insight on this issue

In contrast to the perceived incentives, concrete company offers for older workers are quite rare in all regions of the BSR: “competence development” constitutes the only aspect with comprehensive significance – around 30% of the enterprises in the BSR (also in Poland) provided that offer. The by far most provisions – especially “mentoring”, “health programs” and “ergonomic infrastructure” – were

⁴⁾ Data from Polish enterprises was not sufficient for this indicator.

⁵⁾ *Ibidem*.

offered in companies in Sweden and Denmark. The data allows for the conclusion that awareness for health-related provisions might be at least slightly higher in the Scandinavian countries. These enterprises also often hold a diversity of arrangements. Generally, a systematic and coordinated approach to support older workers and attract longer employment cannot be detected from the data. At the same time, external expertise on demographic challenges is sought by only a small minority of companies, with the exception of Latvia.

Last but not least, the evaluation of attributes of older workers⁶⁾ offered the opportunity to reflect on their specific role in enterprises, especially compared to younger workers. Summing up, a comparison between attributes of older and younger employees display the general advantage of broad professional competency of Best Ager. This conclusion is clearly and positively acknowledged by employers throughout all BSR countries. Together with high social competences such as reliability and loyalty, this result supports the notion of older workers as indispensable members of a skilled and differentiated workforce. Hence, their professional experience as well as good knowledge of company-specific structures and internal sequences should be picked up systematically and used in knowledge transfer, mentoring and competence development. At the same time, rising awareness of a perceived lower adaptability to change might help to cope with that challenge, and employers ought to deal with this task in order to support older employees. Here, for example a knowledge transfer between younger workers and Best Ager – for instance on IT-related tasks – could be initiated the other way round. Last but not least, decreasing physical capabilities and growing health-constraints are inevitably connected to an ageing workforce. This result should however not lead to a negative estimation of older workers as such, but instead support further investments in internal health-care measures and an improved ergonomic infrastructure for an ageing workforce.

3. Conclusions

In general, the results as well as further research in the different regions reveal that concrete action with regard to demographic change is still quite limited in the selected enterprises around the BSR. Although awareness for demographic challenges and potentially affected business domains can be ascribed to a majority of enterprises, this does not necessarily materialize into systematic approaches in order to counteract these challenges, and to establish concrete Age Management policies. There might be a number of reasons for that, among others limited financial power, lack of staff and/or expertise to tackle the issue properly – especially in SME. Nevertheless, this gap between high awareness and limited action poses a major problem in times of ageing workforces and a shrinking working age population.

⁶⁾ Data from Polish enterprises was not sufficient and could not be integrated in the analysis.

One possible suggestion which can be drawn from these results might be further increase in information and sensitization of enterprises with regard to development of the working-age population and other demographic consequences. However, these informatory approaches should inevitably be complemented by applied Age Management measures in Small- and Medium-sized companies in order to implement a more strategic and long-term perspective with regard to ageing staff and connected challenges. Additionally, workforces and employees themselves might become more prominent addressees in the future as well, since their perspectives must not be neglected, but their active participation encouraged. In contrast, a stronger position of employees and a clearer focus on more self-determination in "later working-life", an improved flexibility of working hours, working conditions and specific work content might serve as a good approach to include employees' perspectives towards a larger benefit.

Finally, the results of this report approve the perspective that demographic change has strong regional specifics and creates diverging regional profiles – with individual challenges, approaches and solutions, respectively. As a consequence, there is a need for further insight in regional population development as well as respective business structures in order to identify specific demands for external expertise and support.

OSOBY W WIEKU 55+ W REGIONIE MORZA BAŁTYCKIEGO – BADANIE JAKOŚCIOWE POSTAW PRACODAWCÓW

Celem artykułu jest próba oceny wpływu zmian demograficznych na zachowania przedsiębiorstw w sześciu państwach Regionu Morza Bałtyckiego: Danii, Niemczech, Łotwy, Litwy, Polski i Szwecji. W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badania postaw pracodawców wobec procesów starzenia się społeczeństwa i zatrudniania pracowników w wieku 55+, zrealizowanych 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. Dostęp do pełnej wersji raportu na stronie internetowej projektu: www.best-agers-project.eu.