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## Psychological and organisational aspects of age management in organisations

### 1. Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to discuss issues connected with age management and to underline its importance in proper resource management in current business environment.

In addition, we wish to draw managing staff's attention to the problem of age management in organizations conditioned by an increase in the number of employees 50+. At present, approximately 31% of employees are employed in this group (up to 64 years of age) in Poland. In contrast, in the EU countries the employment rate 'after fifty' exceeds 50%. The article discusses the specificity of developmental processes which characterise the population of fifty-year-old employees and older. We also paid attention to the situation of representatives of 50+ cohort on the Polish labour market, critically referring to the current stereotypes and the problem of ageism. The age management was presented in the context of both pathology and positive practices. The article is based on the literature analysis and observations as well as conclusions of the authors.

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## 2. Characteristic of changes occurring in the phase of middle and late adulthood

Psychological studies on human development throughout the whole life (*life-span developmental psychology*) indicate that this stage is connected with lowering physical and mental ability, but at the same time with a change in attitudes towards work and professional activity, which gains importance due to, inter alia, fewer family commitments, the increasing need to engage in professional and social relationships which strengthen self-esteem (Baltes et al. 1980, pp. 65-110; Brzezińska et al. 2008, pp. 178-195). Data show that people at the age of 50+ are often characterized by a higher level of competences than younger people in the scope of complex psychomotor activities despite occurring deficits in the range of elementary functions (Marcinek 2007, pp. 69-75).. Deficits are compensated due to much greater experience and thanks to the application of proven and effective operational strategies which were achieved in practice (Brzezińska et al. 2008, pp. 178-195). Thus, the pragmatic abilities in the scope of solving problems condition a successful course of adaptation to new situations, even at work. Therefore, competences and changes in the range of attitudes towards work, which characterise employees with a longer period of work, should be the starting point for a discussion on the legitimacy of using the potentials of this group taking into consideration its increasing number and a change in the retirement age limits. The key here is to take into account the factors relevant to human development and not only professional, namely environmental and social, including professional and biological as well as their interactions.

The impact of the abovementioned three groups of factors (Finoginow 2013, pp. 93-104) is revealed in three developmental orders throughout the whole life, i.e. in the age-related normative development (reflecting the basic model of changes occurring along with age and remaining in relation to social expectations to a large extent), in the normative development connected with the history of a given generation (reflecting the impact of important events on the way of functioning of entire generations – what is important, generation 50+ is associated with different labour standards), in the non-normative development (reflecting the impact of important life events on the process of development) (Straś-Romanowska 2000, pp. 263-292). It should be emphasized that these orders may create different constellations in relation to specific individuals, which results in the fact that in the discussed group of employees there can be found both people in perfect psychophysical condition, engaged in the work for whom

it is a source of satisfaction and those for whom professional activity is a burden because of health condition or a family situation

On the other hand, it is possible to analyze the situation of employees 50+ taking into account, except the birth certificate age, also the social, biological and psychological age. The birth certificate age (chronological), which is measured by the number of years of a given person, is helpful in determining specific changes and developmental standards which are characteristic of age. However, the social age is connected with a cultural factor and refers to social expectations regarding the specificity of behaviors of employees at a certain age. In this aspect, which is often stereotyped, when referring to biological age, employees are assigned specific and often negative attitudes towards work (a decrease of motivation, lack of necessary competences etc.). A legal effect of achieving a specified chronological and social age is granting elderly people with pensions as well as with appropriate entitlements and social benefits. Following the idea, the biological age is measured by physical fitness of the body, whereas the psychological age is expressed mainly by the degree of cognitive ability and an individual level of activity specific to a given person conditioned by, for example, temperament or personality factors. The course of changes occurring in a particular person, however, is individualized and conditioned by health, a social situation and the psychosocial efficiency of an employee, therefore it is necessary to take into account different models of professional activities that may characterise employees 50+ (<http://www.mpips.gov.pl/praca/programy-i-projekty/programy-specjalne-finansowane-z-rezerwy-fp-bedacej-w-dyspozycji-ministra-wlasciwego-ds-pracy/program-aktywizacji-zawodowej-osob-powyzej-50-roku-zycia>).

Age management should take into consideration the individual character of changes – depending on the social, family, and economic context as well as on internal resources such as the system of values, psychological maturity, personality integration, and a previous way of psychosocial functioning. It should be emphasised that often at this stage of life the importance of work and commitment to it increases, which constitutes a considerable value distinguishing older workers against the background of the younger ones. It can be ascertained that, by referring to the considerations presented by J. Czarnota-Bojarska, older workers are characterized by productive civil behaviours. This group is characterized as ‘Best Agers’ – well educated, loyal, motivated and healthier than younger generations (<http://www.best-agers-project.eu/>). Hence, it is reasonable to break down stereotypes that employees 50+ are very demanding, conservative, they are the heirs of the ‘previous system’, they have

outdated knowledge and skills, they just want to 'wait' for their retirement, they have low self-esteem, they are afraid of losing their jobs, they are characterized by the lack of energy and are resistant to changes. Stereotypes are reflected in the situation of this group of employees on the labour market and the condition of the labour market as a whole.

To sum up, extending the average length of human life, a different pace of people's aging as well as a biologically, psychologically and socially diverse course of developmental processes at the stage of middle and late adulthood constitute facts that cannot be ignored by employers. On the other hand, paradoxically, stereotypes referring to the homogeneous image of older employees have their consequences which are often expressed by disregard, underestimation, and finally discrimination towards employees 50+.

### **3. Age management – from pathology to positive practices**

In modern Polish organisations we can observe a fairly common phenomenon which is a tendency to hire young people. In many companies the average age is about thirty, which significantly differs from the average age of the population of people potentially active as regards their professions. We are therefore faced with a situation in which the surrounding society is multigenerational, whereas in companies young people with only a several-year experience or are just starting their careers dominate. This trend does not refer to all industries and sectors of the economy to the same degree. The policy of hiring young people occurs primarily in banking companies, firms based on new technologies and IT, and to a lesser extent in the budgetary organisations as well as in local governments. However, in Polish private universities a contrary tendency appears, there is a greater demand for older employees with scientific titles, often at the retirement age, which is connected with the need to meet high requirements for the so-called minimum staff. While in Poland the percentage of employees aged 50+ (55-64 years old) is approximately 31%, whereas in the European Union countries it exceeds 50%. In this regard Scandinavian countries are the leaders, particularly Sweden where the share of employees at this age exceeds 70% (European Commission, 2009). This condition is connected with a number of factors, primarily with a demographic structure of the state. In our opinion, the main factor, however, is the concept of human resources management, which functions in a given society and is shared by employers.

A discriminatory policy of companies in relation to a particular group of employees constitutes undoubtedly a manifestation of organisational pathology

and at the same time violation of two fundamental principles of human resources management which are diversity management and flexible management of human resources. The implementation of these principles is a necessity in today's organisations, they are also the subject of scientists' research and they are discussed by specialist and practitioners (Listwan, Stor 2012; Witkowski, Stor 2012). Age management, which is underestimated and neglected by most of our managers and HR-staff, *is an element of human resources and more precisely, the element of diversity management. It involves the implementation of various activities which allow for a more rational and efficient use of human resources in a company by taking into account the needs and possibilities of employees of different ages* (Liwiński, Sztanderska 2010, p. 3).

By adopting such a method of understanding the term *age management*, it can be ascertained that any non-essential preference to a specific age group of employees is a manifestation of pathology in the field of this management. Age management should take place on two levels (Liwiński, Sztanderska, 2010):

- **at the macro level** - a social policy of the state (providing labour power for the economy, family policy, promoting and gratifying professional activity of people of retirement age, migration policy),
- **at the micro level** - activities of bosses and personnel services of companies (prevention of discrimination against employees of different ages, in particular the elderly, adapting the work to the needs and possibilities of employees of different ages, using advantages and disadvantages of employees representing different age groups, fighting against 'age stereotypes', flexibility of employment, a possibility to perform professional activities outside a regular place of employment).

When we ask CEOs about the reasons for employing mainly young workers, they apparently provide reasonable arguments. According to them, young employees are better prepared in the subject matter to solve problems of modern organisations, they have current knowledge and skills relating to business economics and modern technical solutions, marketing issues and IT management support. These arguments are only partially convincing. Taking into account the fact that the new, free-market management conditions have been in force in our country for 27 years, the current teaching curricula were included in the modified educational programs at the secondary and higher education. It can therefore be assumed that employees approaching the age of 50 are familiar with these issues on the basis of practice and various forms of improvement.

The above mentioned CEOs who mostly employ young workers present additional reasons which justify their personnel policy. In their opinion, young

employees are more dynamic, better motivated for work, they get sick less often and learn faster. We can agree with these opinions only partially. The research shows that in the above mentioned age group, as often as in other groups, there appear phenomena such as excessive psychological costs of labour (Witkowski, Mesjasz 2003), a strong organisational stress connected with undertaking fairly frequently tasks beyond employees' strength, which is a consequence of deficits of necessary professional experience. The studies do not confirm the rectilinear relationship between intensification of professional burnout and the age and the labour experience of employees. Burnt-out employees are not only the domain of people with extensive experience. We can increasingly notice burned-out employees with only a several-year work experience, which adversely affects their productivity and has specific health and psychological consequences (Witkowski, Ślęzyk-Sobol 2012, pp. 63-73; Witkowski, Ślęzyk-Sobol 2013, pp. 88-103).

Overestimating the values of young employees along with discrimination against employees 50+ is not justified in the light of the report of Ernst & Young (*Global Generations*) and TNS (<http://nesweek.pl/jak-pracuje-polskie-pokolenie-Y>). These studies provide data which show that generation Y belongs to one of the most overworked groups of employees. Two-thirds of young employees feel strong overtiredness, have problems with concentration, whereas stress as well as excess of duties disrupts their rhythm of work. This group of employees, in particular employed in corporations, regularly work more than eight hours, complain about bureaucratic barriers, and inflexible management. Almost half of them prefer to have an opportunity to work at home, which is not always accepted by bosses. As we mentioned above, the implementation of the personnel policy prioritizing certain age groups is a manifestation of the lack of flexibility in personnel management and underestimation of diversity management. Deficiencies in flexible management of human resources and underestimation of diversity management (including age, culture, personality, temperament,) may in the long term lead to serious business problems. The importance of proper age management is distinctly growing, particularly in the situation of a real demographic crisis and the employees' tendency to migrate in search of better conditions of work. In all EU countries we can observe a process of the society aging, which is connected with a lower 'fertility' of the young generation, progress in medicine, an increase in pro-health attitudes and as a consequence lengthening of the average age of life of citizens.

According to the forecasts of the GUS, which were developed back in 2008 for the years 2010 -2035, the number of people at the working age will be decreasing



consistently. The forecasts assume that in 2020 the number of people at the working age will be more than two million less than it was in 2010, whereas in 2035 this decrease will concern over three million people. These data show that underestimation of the importance of older employees with a deficit of middle-aged employees at the same time is a manifestation of short-sightedness of all institutions (political, governmental and socio-cultural) responsible for the provision of labour power for the economy. This comment also refers to bringing back the retirement age at 60 for women and 65 for men. The above mentioned data unambiguously show that the condition for maintaining the current number of employees is indispensable professional activation of older employees. For this group of employees work may serve a therapeutic function because it is not only the source of income, it also confirms professional usefulness and constitutes a possibility to transfer their knowledge and experience to the younger generation ([http://stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/gus/L\\_prognoza\\_ludnosci\\_PL\\_2008-2035.pdf](http://stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/gus/L_prognoza_ludnosci_PL_2008-2035.pdf))

A significant percentage of employees consisting of people from group 50+, which can be observed in western countries, may lead to the assumption that in terms of education, competence and personality, these people are better prepared for professional roles. Psychological comparative research of this group of employees in the UK and Poland have not confirmed this assumption. 60 employees (30 Poles and 30 British), aged 50-60, working in supermarkets such as Tesco, Castorama, Obi and B&Q (UK renovation and construction retailer) took part in the research by A. Czarnecka (2012). Differences between Polish and British employees in the scope of four factors such as dispositional optimism, the level of perceived stress, life satisfaction and self-efficacy were studied (Czarnecka 2012). The analysis of the results showed that there were no significant differences in the level of stress in both groups of employees as well as in the conviction of self-efficacy and dispositional optimism. The British and the Poles achieved average results as regards the scale of perceived stress and optimism, which leads to the conclusion that the conditions of work and life situation of employees functioning in similar organisational cultures in Poland and Great Britain interact in a similar way when it comes to the analyzed variables. Both groups of employees did not differ in terms of self-efficacy either and showed high scores on the General Self-Efficacy Scale. It is an interesting result which confirms the role and importance of accumulated professional experiences influencing the belief about possibilities of solving problems which occur at work. However, there were statistically significant differences in results between the British and Polish employees with regard to Satisfaction with Life scale. Polish employees were characterized by lower satisfaction than citizens of

the UK. The reasons for these differences can be probably sought in a culturally conditioned focus on negative aspects of life of the Poles, unlike the British. To sum up, both groups of employees turn out to be more similar than different and the obtained results indicate such resources that are conducive to professional activity after the age of 50 and at the same time they make it possible to adapt to the changing work conditions. Competencies characterising older employees, which are generally defined as life pragmatics, are formed on the basis of the increasing along with age resource of experiences which should be used and appreciated by younger employees (Olejnik 2006, pp. 234-258). The obtained results justify carrying out the research in this area and taking specific action with regard to various aspects of age management.

#### **4. Benefits of age management**

Among the benefits resulting from the introduction of comprehensive age management in companies, there are, among other things, such aspects as (Liwiński, Sztanderska 2010, p. 12) the increase in flexibility of personnel management, especially at the age of 50+, the increase in the level of efficiency, inclusion and acceptance of age management tools to the personnel strategy of a company. It is confirmed by numerous good practices applied in companies functioning in the European Union countries (e.g. Filter Sevis (Poland), Danone Serdika, Bulgaria, Emerol (Latvia), PTK Echo (Slovakia), KSB (Germany), DSM (the Netherlands), which were presented by the authors. The analysis of the above mentioned good practices allows for the selection of common elements, which, inter alia, include:

- permanent intergenerational transfer of knowledge and experience which will reduce deficits in competences,
- introduction of organisational culture which will prohibit discrimination based on age,
- activities which will integrate employees of different ages,
- HR policy aiming to keep older employees,
- protection of salaries in the situation of necessary movements to other positions.
- redesigning workplaces by taking into account ergonomic principles to reduce the risk of accidents,
- training in the range of planning professional careers,
- flexible working hours,
- exemption from night shifts,



- training newly hired employees by people aged 50+,
- free health insurance and providing regular medical examinations.

These activities, as any other in the range of management, should be implemented in a planned and systematic way. It is necessary to control and evaluate the implemented process.

## 5. Strategy of age management

Rational age management cannot be of a selective character, but it should primarily be a system of complex operations involving the well-known stages of dealing with human resources management, namely selection, systematic improvement, adaptation, promoting efficiency of work (e.g. flexible employment, movements within the company, adapting conditions to the characteristics of an employee), motivating and evaluating as well as finishing work. By the term professional choice we usually understand adaptation of man to work, therefore in order for an employee to be able to effectively perform certain tasks when incurring minimal costs, in the case of people 50+ it is equally important to take into consideration the process of adapting working conditions to the older man. In the case of people 50+ the activities connected with the formation of pro-health and health protection attitudes are of particular significance.

Moreover, age management is not a single operation dedicated to employees but it is a long-term process implemented by employers and also individually by employees who, in the context of age and the professional as well as non-professional situation, health condition and other factors, make decisions about managing their career path. Age management for each of us means a chance to stay an active and attractive participant on the labour market for a longer time (<http://www.humansolutions.pl/page/pl/zarzadzanie-wiekim/>).

What should be taken into consideration are actions of a preventive character which aim at preparing employees for occurring changes, taking temporary measures in response to a current situation in a company, branch or situation on the labour market. Examples of such activities might be effective training to improve competences of older employees. Anticipative actions taking into account predicted changes on the labour market as well as the location of a particular employee and whole groups of employees are also necessary. This is consistent with the Lisbon Strategy adopted in 2000 by the European Union countries. It indicated therein that one of the objectives of the European Union was to achieve the employment rate for people aged 55-64 at the level not lower than 50% (<http://www.humansolutions.pl/page/pl/zarzadzanie-wiekim/>).

It is obvious that the implementation of the objectives, which were formulated in this way, requires actions to be taken simultaneously on many levels – not only in the field of the labour market but also related to changing attitudes and public awareness as well as legislative solutions in the scope of labour law and organizational matters in companies.

According to the guidelines of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions – Eurofound, effective programs for age management in companies should include activities such as recruitment of employees with no age limit, continuous staff training, other kinds of training, long-term planning and career development of employees, changes in the organisation of work (using flexible working hours, adapting the system of shift work, additional vacations, staff rotation), promotion and protection of health of employees, providing safe working conditions, transferring older employees for jobs less burdensome, programs of work completion and retirement (Bugajska, Makowiec-Dabrowska, Wągrowaska-Koski 2010, p. 56). It should be emphasised that within the framework of reinforcing activities in the scope of age management while implementing projects related to professional activation, which are co-financed by the EFS, there is a rule which requires that the implemented training must include issues of education and development of people 45+ (<http://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Intermentoring-doswiadczenie-roznych-pokolen-w-pracy-2116465.html>).

With regard to the employees from group 50+, the realization of postulates, followed by age management programs, eventually does not only prevent or reduce negative psychological consequences or the psychosocial sense of self-esteem decrease of 50+ employees (such as a feeling that they do not have appropriate competences or are not able to meet current requirements at the workplace, etc.) or the risk of early retirement (e.g. because of professional burnout, lack of developmental prospects, uncertainty about the professional future, etc.), but it also extends the period of employment in a company, which in turn lowers the costs of recruitment and enables the use of employees' experience for a long time. The adoption of the age management strategy may become a peculiar program of building employees' loyalty to the company which will prevent fluctuation of employees that are valuable for the company.

## 6. Conclusion

Age management is still a neglected area of human resources management in Polish companies. Negligence in this field means violation of basic principles

concerning flexibility and the use of diversity in employees management. It is therefore necessary to increase awareness of the importance of age management among managers, employees, employers and representatives of institutions who are responsible for the social policy in the state. Without taking preemptive system actions, Polish companies will be fairly disadvantaged on the competitive international market. Changes in the labor market show that there appears a strong tendency for the formation of the market employee, which will mean the occurrence of strong deficits in the qualified staff. In this situation, employees 50+ will constitute an invaluable resource of this staff, the resource which must be managed in a competent way. The authors of the study predict that in Poland over the next few years there will be an increase in employment of 50+ employees forced by a demographic and labour market situation, which requires a number of actions signalled in this article.

It is very important to remember that age management, despite the fact that it is associated primarily with older employees and ultimately addressed to them, within the framework of the existing and functioning different types of programs 50+, promotes and affects younger employees, which is an undeniably useful value in the face of ongoing and progressive demographic changes. It should be emphasised that even if age management systems ad hoc are more older employees oriented, the positive effects of their actions are also experienced by younger employees (Bugajska et al. 2010, p. 56).

In the context of the increase in the number of employees 50+ and their participation on the labour market – building ‘bridges instead of walls’ between different groups of stakeholders, namely employees representing different age groups may condition effectiveness and also determine the assessment of a company and its perception in the local community. Thus ignoring and undervaluing the issue of age management is maladaptive.

## Summary

### **Psychological and organisational aspects of age management in organisations**

In article we present selected issues of age management in organizations. They pointed to the lack of rationale for the discriminatory policies of some companies to employees aged 50+. Attention of managers was paid to the problem of age management in organizations, conditioned by an increase in the number of employees 50+. In Poland, currently there are employed approx. 31% of workers in this group (64 years old).

While in EU countries the employment rate for workers aged fifty years and older more than 50%. The article discusses the specifics of the development processes and changes in the phase of middle and late adulthood, characterizing the population of employees and pointing to the “strengths” of the group. Age management in the context of both pathology and positive practices was presented. Referring to the data the benefits of age management were indicated.

**Key words:** *demographic changes, employees 50+, age management, good practices.*

### **Streszczenie**

#### **Psychologiczne i organizacyjne aspekty zarządzania wiekiem w organizacjach**

W artykule przedstawiono wybrane zagadnienia zarządzania wiekiem w organizacjach. Wskazano na brak racjonalnych przesłanek dla dyskryminującej polityki niektórych przedsiębiorców w stosunku do pracowników w wieku 50+. Zwrócono uwagę kadr zarządzających na problem zarządzania wiekiem w organizacjach, uwarunkowany wzrostem liczby pracowników 50+. W Polsce aktualnie jest zatrudnionych ok. 31% pracowników w tej grupie (do 64 roku życia). Natomiast w krajach Unii Europejskiej wskaźnik zatrudnienia pracowników w wieku pięćdziesięciu lat i starszych przekracza 50%. W artykule omówiono specyfikę procesów rozwojowych i zmian zachodzących w fazie średniej i późnej dorosłości, wskazując na „mocne strony” tej grupy. Przedstawiono zarządzanie wiekiem w kontekście zarówno patologii jak i pozytywnych praktyk. Odnosząc się do danych wskazano na korzyści zarządzania wiekiem.

### **Słowa**

**kluczowe:** *zmiany demograficzne, pracownicy 50+, zarządzanie wiekiem, dobre praktyki.*

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