



## Ageing Workforce & Disability: strategies and services to meet demand Seminar organised by EPR & Workability Europe

14 February 2008

*Hotel Leopold, Rue du Luxembourg 35, B-1050, Brussels, Belgium*

### Summary Report<sup>1</sup>

On 14 February 2008, EPR and Workability Europe co-organised a one-day Training Seminar in Brussels on the theme of “Ageing Workforce and Disability.” The Seminar was attended by 25 participants from 13 countries. It was facilitated by Dr Richard Wynne from the Work Research Centre in Ireland.



The EU is facing unprecedented demographic changes that will have a major impact on the whole of society and the number of older workers is expected to rise substantially in the next two decades. In this respect, the Seminar aimed to address the challenges for rehabilitation service providers and employers as a result of the ageing of the workforce. Balancing professional expertise with theoretical and practical approaches, the event allowed participants to gain insights into key issues such as the demographics of an ageing workforce, good practices in employment guidance services for older workers and the development of new services.

Following an opening by Jan Spooren, General Secretary of EPR and Hans Vrind, President of Workability Europe, **Session 1** of the Seminar set the context. It demonstrated that older workers are more at risk of disability and that their ability to work is declining especially if the

“Europe’s workforce is ageing and as the workforces ages, health disimproves”.

*R. Wynne, trainer*

<sup>1</sup> The ppt presentation from the Seminar is available on the WE website.

right support mechanisms are not in place. In terms of future trends, successive diagrams proved that the population aged 65 and over relative to the working age population will increase more than twofold between 2005 and 2050. Europeans' life expectancy is rising whilst birthrates are falling. The cost of illness such as mental disorders is huge and also increasing with age, i.e. as the workforce ages, disability rises. Illness/disability accounts for the inactivity of over 30% of European between the age of 45 and 54.

Europe is still falling short of the Stockholm target of having 50% of older workers in employment by 2010. That is in spite of the EU Employment Guidelines stressing support for active ageing, including appropriate working conditions, improved (occupational) health status and adequate incentives to work and discouragement of early retirement. Certain trends in pension reform are observable too such as raising of retirement age, reductions in benefits and in some countries even provision of bonuses to retire later. With regard to disability pensions in particular, there is a noticeable tightening of eligibility rules and increased focus on early return to work.

R. Wynne outlined several reasons why older workers face multiple barriers to retaining employment including discrimination in training and in career development (despite a specific EU Directive outlawing discrimination in employment on the basis of age plus other grounds); lack of suitable jobs; incentives to retire such as pensions systems, partner behaviour, caring roles and the attitudes of fellow workers.

**Session 2** focused on models of good practice in employment and rehabilitation services. Many services are needed to help disabled people to enter/return to work. These include: medical rehabilitation, vocational rehabilitation, job placement, guidance and counselling. To illustrate examples of innovative approaches to employment guidance services of the target group, the trainer highlighted the findings of one comprehensive transnational study conducted by EUROFOUND.

“Strategies addressing labour shortages should look at both ends of the equation – the provision of affordable child care and increasing birth rates as well as keeping older workers at work.”

*A participant*

R. Wynne then described three different models of good practice in age management at company level coming from Finland (Joensuu), the Netherlands (Sodexo) and Germany (BMW). The interesting fact about companies with successful age management policies is that many of them tend to have developed integrated approaches, combining, for example: training measures, career management occupational health, flexible work organisation and flexible working times. The Finnish “Maintenance of Work Ability” national strategy was cited as a particularly successful model to maintain and improve workers health, wellbeing and employability. The trainer recapped eight important dimensions of age management, namely: job recruitment, learning, training and lifelong learning, career development, flexible working time practices, health protection and promotion and workplace design, redeployment, employment exit and the transition to retirement and comprehensive approaches.



In **Sessions 3 and 4** the participants did a lot of useful work in breakout groups addressing questions posed by the trainer and putting forward their recommendations. Two of the practical exercises revolved around the definition of services (what services should there be for older workers) and the definition of strategies (how should the services be delivered).

The Seminar ended with conclusions and action points for the future. The current situation with regard to services and strategies is the following: not all relevant services are available or widely accessible; some promising programmes/projects pointing the way forward exist. However, few national programmes are in place and there is often no national consensus on the nature and scale of the ageing problem or on what should be the response. The solution must therefore involve a combination of actions: attitude change amongst all stakeholders; development and redefinition of services refocusing on prevention of early retirement; new packaging of services and the development of new strategies.



### Seminar Evaluation

The collected Evaluation forms indicate that participants were satisfied with all aspects of the event: practical organisation, trainer and content. Below are listed some reflections from participants on the question ***“What did you ‘bring home’ from this Seminar that you are going to use in your daily practice?”***

- A different view on the issue of how to manage older workers
- Higher general awareness, some useful practices from other participants
- Confirmation that our ideas and concepts are the right ones
- New contacts important for further work
- Theoretical approaches and practical ones, good examples
- Older people are only a small part of my work, I will pay more attention to them
- There are many ways to retain the workability – it is the task for the future
- Very interesting to share experience from so many European countries – good facilitation
- good ideas for in-house use, points to be made in the field of rehabilitation, facts
- Information for further dissemination to the relevant persons
- Raised awareness about the challenges facing ageing workers
- Ideas to organise service delivery