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A Social Dialogue to improve working conditions

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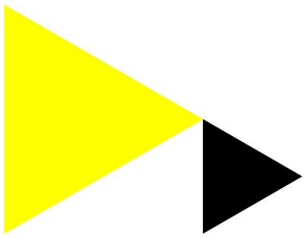

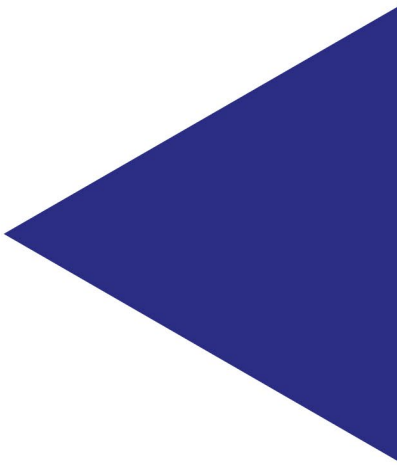

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Creating Tomorrow

A Social Dialogue to improve working conditions

Keywords: Self-regulation in communication, empowerment, Social Dialogue, Age diversity policy

Zinsmeister[1] & Meerman[2]

The aim of the project is to empower older workers in communication and self-regulation in work and working conditions (Houben 2002). The project is an example of a developmental approach of an age diversity policy. The large scale project started in September 2005 in different organizations: an industrial organization, a management consultancy firm,etc.

We start the project in an elderly care organization. In dialogue with HRM officials we formulate the research question "To what extent are the developmental approach and the social dialogue effective in enabling older employees to make use of their optimal self-regulation until their retirement?"

For gathering data we use the social dialogue with two groups of older workers to find out the ideas the older workers have about improving their working conditions. We want to know more about the performance and self-regulation of older workers. At the same time, the research project contributes to establishing productive and meaningful labour relationships. (Meerman, 2005)

The investigation is part of the Midlife Resourcing Project and is carried out in an institution affiliated to the Vivium care group. The project broadens the investigation to various sectors, including the provincial government and the education, business services, industrial production and health care sectors.

The project operates within the following context:
- The increase of labour participation of people aged 45 and over is desirable;
- In the Netherlands and the EU, labour participation of people aged 45 and over is too low;
- More than 50% of all job seekers is aged 40 years or over;
- People aged 45 and over have less chance of employment when applying for a job;
- The employment of people aged 45 and over is inadequate;

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With this investigation, the project aims to stimulate the discussion between employers and employees about the above-mentioned topics; to use the experience of older employees more effectively; and to develop tools to do so.

This article describes the realization of those goals within the care sector of the Vivium care group. Vivium's aim is a more conscious and goal-directed utilization of the specific skills of older workers. The organization wishes to hold on to older employees. Vivium is aware of the problems of older employees in its work organizations and has opted for a developmental approach in its older employees policy, in which their strength and self-regulation are the main issue. In order to realize that goal, we use the social dialogue. We formulated the following research question:

"To what extent are the developmental approach and the social dialogue sufficiently effective to enable older employees to make use of their optimal self-regulation until their retirement?"

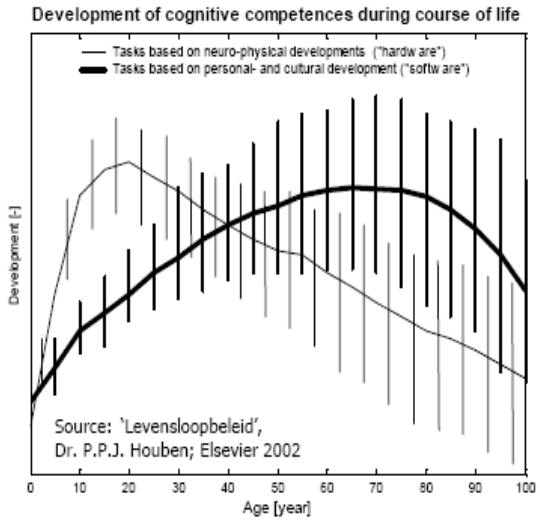
First, we will examine more closely the different concepts concerning older workers: self-regulation, empowerment, a developmental approach and the social dialogue. We will then give an impression of our research. We will conclude our report with our findings up-to-now and with some topics we wish to put forward for discussion.

Concepts about older workers

The Baltes' line chart

In the first life phase the hard disk is filled; a human being is able to store an often unlimited wealth of knowledge and skills. The second half of life is more focused on holding on to the knowledge that has proved useful, practical and valuable in the course of life. As a consequence, even more than in the first half of life regulation competences that are relevant for personal growth and for determining meaningful life goals develop in the second life phase (Houben 2002). Baltes developed this theory on the basis of many in-depth interviews. He demonstrates that the ability to acquire knowledge and skills rapidly increases until the age of 20 and then very slowly diminishes. This includes the brains' capability of mental arithmetic, precisely memorizing and applying regulatory guidelines and quickly and accurately assessing situations and making appropriate decisions.

The second ability increases more slowly. This ability represents the adequate dealing with emotions and challenges from the environment, self-knowledge and the quality of one's life, professional skills, culture and wisdom.



In the first life phase we are more easily capable of learning things we are not interested in; later this is so much more difficult, that we often do not even attempt to. This is not necessarily, as long as we know how to entice older workers and encourage them to work longer and more productively. An encouraging work environment shows interest in older workers and challenges them to remain focused and continue developing themselves for a longer time, taking into account their specific qualities: the ability of communicative self-regulation (Houben 2002). Up to a very old age, human beings are capable of personal development in interaction with their environment. When true interaction is encouraged, people can still 'peak' at a very high age where specific skills are concerned, which older people may contribute to our knowledge society and are urgently needed in the next decennia. The contribution of older workers may also be converted into innovative activities. To realize this, we do have to have more direct entry to older workers' ideas, insights and ingenuity. This clearly asks for a different HRM approach and method than is now usually applied in companies and organization for their 45-plus employees. There is a need for encouraging older employees to participate in this and have their voices heard. We call this empowerment.

Empowerment

Empowerment refers to the actual improvement of people's ability to direct their own lives (Boog et al 2000). On individual level, this means that those involved are capable of acting with more confidence, both in the performance of the work, in the organization and in other areas of life. On individual level, this results in a better balance between the individuals' personal wishes and the requirements set by the environment they function in. Empowerment on collective level means that the group to which the individual belongs gains more influence on the organization, is heard and has more say. Empowerment is a prerequisite for a social dialogue. There should be more room in the organization for a dialogue in which practitioners have the intention of explicating the implicit. (Karin Ronnerman et all. 2006)

The empowerment of individuals and the social dialogue in organizations can only thrive in an environment where they are noticed and regarded as an important factor for the organization of the work.

Various age diversity policies

The awareness of age differences between workers and the importance of older workers varies.

In related literature, various employers' orientations are presented (Cox 1993, Taylor & Walker 1998). We distinguish five different orientations (Meerman & Finsveen 2005):

- The employer ignores the subject. There is no consideration of age differences between workers.
- Employers only react to problems with older employees. Organizational problems are actually caused by or related to older employees and create a negative image. The older employees must adapt, otherwise they are excluded from participation or, as a reaction, they will exclude themselves.
    - Older workers are protected. The employers consider measures to make the participation of older workers in the workforce easier. Organizations that feel older workers are less physically able than their younger counterparts, base their protectionist measures on the Collective Labour Agreement.
    - With a developmental approach, the organization's intention is to hold on to older employees for as long as possible. To reach this objective, measures such as job changes and focus, training and mobility are necessary.
    - Finally, there are organizations where - in general - different types of employees are valued. This approach is not only based on age differences, but also on gender, educational, professional and ethnic differences that influence age and the relationship to work. The premise of this category is that all members of the organization must learn to accept differences.

In line with Thijssen (1997), in order to make empowerment and self-regulation possible we assume the developmental approach in our investigation. Moreover, we are curious to find out to what extent the older workers' specific qualities are appreciated and allowed room to be utilized in the performance of the work.

The research organization: Vivium

Vivium is an umbrella organization of care institutions in "t Gooi-Noord', a region in the middle of the Netherlands. It offers care and services, especially for the elderly. The Vivium Care organization is made up of eleven institutions with a total of 2000 members of staff. Together, they offer various types of care, like nursing home care, care in rest homes, care and services in sheltered accommodation, advice and treatment of elderly people, 'link-up care' in Gooi-Noord Hospital as well as different services for the elderly, such as restaurants for seniors.

Vivium is dealing with staff problems. The personnel base is rather homogeneous. That is to say, of all 2000 members of staff, approximately 60% is aged 45 or over, and about 10% is male. There is a great outflow of those aged 55 and over. There is a minimum inflow of young and ethnic staff.

The staff is one-sidedly older than 40. The sector depends on older female employees, who almost all work part-time. The inflow primarily consists of 40-plus women, who often still have to be trained. The women working in care are characterized by a vast life and work experience. During their lives and careers, they often have developed an independent way of working; their work identity is self-confident and full of vitality.

To guarantee the continued existence of the care group, long-term attention to a young inflow and bringing a halt to the early outflow is vital. In the short term, attending to the well-being of the current personnel base of older workers has priority. Alongside the regulations that directly originate from the Collective Labour Agreement, such as more days off for employees aged 55 and over and no obligations to work nights, Vivium has taken a number of specific measures in respect of the developmental approach. The care group wishes to promote its employees' mobility and make them consider their own careers, even when they have reached the age of 50.

The care sector in the Netherlands, thus including Vivium, is furthermore struggling with often enforced major changes. The merger with other care groups in the region has thus become an obvious goal. Also, the content of the work is changing by the implementation of demand-based care by the government and the accompanying financial basis for the care provided. These changes have consequences for the content of the work, because the innovation towards demand-based care means that residents buy their care packages beforehand. Staff can no longer shape the work process themselves; they are strictly guided by the pre-bought care demands. This limits their own creativity, the utilization of specific experience and their independent way of working.

The change towards demand-based working requires a central and more businesslike control from the management. It seeks to structure the work process along new central lines, and the employees have to be prepared to cooperate with and help shape this 'modernization'.

The Midlife Resourcing project

Older employees keeping on working for a longer time, changes in the content of the work and a good personnel policy were reasons for Vivium to join the project. By participating in the Midlife Resourcing project, Vivium wants to make more conscious use of the knowledge and specific skills of its personnel in order to realize the necessary changes and especially the implementation of demand-based care. Knowledge of how to steer and guide older employees is needed to do so. Vivium wants to be a learning organization. Knowledge of innovation processes in general as well as the correct control thereof in the work processes in the entire organization are thereby important. The human resource management, carried out by the supervisors and P&O advisers, regards the Midlife resource project as a chance to solve the dilemma of central control by the management and the self-regulation of the older employees. To refine existing

instruments and develop new ones to streamline satisfactorily conclude the necessary change process.

Methodology: Action research and the social dialogue in all layers of the organization

Point of departure
The dilemma Vivium is dealing with, requires particular alertness from the researchers. The project goals and the task the organization is faced with, demand carefulness and adequacy of knowledge. Mutual adequacy in the research process exists, when both the researcher and the research subjects agree on the results. It is about continual assessment of the knowledge acquired in the research process to the best of the knowledge and skills at that time. The following criteria may thereby be distinguished (Boog et al. 2000):
- is the acquired knowledge correct, true and genuine?
- does the knowledge contribute to the improvement of practice?
- is the knowledge and the way it was acquired sufficiently scientific?
Boog et al. point out that this refers to the quality criteria that are used in the research community the researcher belongs to.

Social dialogue in the organization
The objective of the social dialogue and action-directed research is to achieve a research goal shared by both the management and the employees of the organization. The objective of the Midlife resourcing project at Vivium was **t**he acknowledgement of the value of motivated 45-plus employees by the employer and the management. The 45-plus employee should be able to develop the ability of communicative self-regulation. The development of guidelines and HRM instruments that improve the labour participation of people of 45-plus.

In concrete, this amounts to a re-calibration of the labour relationship, whereby the participating older employee keeps on working healthily and optimally utilizes his or her self-regulation to the benefit of the organization. The supervisor wants the investigation to offer instruments for the effective and productive organization of the work process. The management wants to contribute to the development of a 'learning' environment that is open to knowledge management and innovation routes, and learns to take more advantage of the 45-plus labour market. As said, the investigation took place and agreement was reached in one of Vivium's 11 institutions.

Social dialogue in the workgroups
The Midlife Resourcing project is successful when older employees are able to use their own communicative self-regulation in their work. In order to investigate this and contribute to the objective as formulated by the management, we organized 2 workgroups that allowed us to directly hear from the staff how they wish to keep on working until their retirement. Employees between the ages of 45 and 54 were given the opportunity to take part in the project. They received a letter at home inviting them to participate. A maximum of 20 people could participate in the experiment and, in accordance

with the number of reactions, 2 groups were formed: one group for the ages of 45-49 and one group for the ages of 50-54. This was a conscious decision of the organizers; they assumed that 45-year old employees do not concern themselves with growing old at work and do not yet fully work on the basis of routine (at Vivium, inflow is at a later age.) But the 54-year olds do: they have had a longer working life and many colleagues were, until recently, allowed to leave the Vivium organization at that age. The pre-pension scheme has now been cancelled, so the 54-year olds of today are now faced with another 8 years work. We were aware of the fact that a division like this may invoke stereotyping and stigmatization. A category may not be of disadvantage to the individual. We are aware that by dividing the group this way, the possibility of the 45-year olds and 54-year olds learning from one another is now limited.

A personnel manager and the researcher support the groups. In their turn, the group leaders participate in a group that acts as a sounding board and consists of trainers, managers and personnel managers.

In order to assure genuineness, we have not included any supervisors in the groups. We do have the express promise from the management that every proposal suggested by the groups to make their work healthier and more enjoyable, will be experimented with. The value of the proposals will be explored in pilot projects.

In both work groups, the participants discuss the problems they meet at work, the personal development they consider important, and what according to them is necessary to healthily and happily reach retirement. The meeting should result in specific proposals for improving the work situation of the older employees.

Self-regulation is paramount in the work groups; the members decide on the topics of conversation. The group leaders' task is to facilitate the process so that all the members' implicit knowledge of their own work situation becomes explicit, can be discussed and may lead to new insights and improved work situations. The work group should be a safe area, so that the participants' creativity can be utilized to the optimum. The group leaders ask questions and try to break through 'the obvious' in daily practice to create room for new ways of working.

Some results

The process

We evaluate our group work on the basis of the concepts of adequacy, optimal self-regulation and communication, and the developmental approach. There is an abundance of participants; more than a quarter of all staff aged between 45 and 55 responded. The groups consist of 10 participants. The selection was left to the participants themselves; they decided on a reserve system. The selection process ran smoothly and without incidents.

The groups consist of women only. Despite efforts, the work schedule of the only male respondent did not allow him to

participate. The participants are mainly personal care attendants, although kitchen, linen room, cleaning and activities support staff also participate.
Currently, the groups consist of seven, respectively nine women, due to training and long-term illness. The group leaders have decided not to replace the dropouts. Because of the depth of the discussions and the mutual trust that has grown, we decided to leave the vacancies open.

Major differences between the groups have not yet been found. What has been found, though, is that each group has its own dynamics and that the group of 50-54-year olds discusses topics in more depth and has a broader view of the work situation. Also, this group expressly takes the initiative. The 45-49 group has a somewhat more dependent attitude towards the group leaders.

The first meeting focused on the motivation to participate. The participants shared their pleasant work experiences with the group. The motivation mainly stems from the fact that they all realize that they have to work for another 10 to 20 years; that they would like to do so at Vivium; and that they consider the project a good initiative. They want to help think and talk about the possibilities they see to make the work more enjoyable.

In the second and third meeting, mainly the current tasks were discussed. Both groups sought topics that could also be turned into policy proposals.
The tentative topics are:

- how to bring a halt to the hospitalization of a large number of staff? Many feel that their hands are strongly tied, which means they are no longer capable of taking initiative themselves.
- how to improve intercommunication and gain more understanding for and insight in each other's work?
- how to make more use of the competences of one's own colleagues, so that staff do not feel that their potential is insufficiently used?
- what possibilities are offered by the structural changes whereby the layer of middle management has been cut and has left an apparent gap in the supervision of the work carried out?
- how to achieve quicker replacement of faulty equipment?

In order to ensure that facts are correct, we ask the participants to react to one another, so that a mutually agreed picture arises. Whatever is factual unclear, is looked into; findings are reported. After each meeting, the group leaders write an elaborate report. This is checked for incorrect facts and subsequently corrected by the participants if need be.
For the truth, we are fully dependent on the participants. We listen and ask them questions, they question each other, we write the reports, they check the reports and propose alterations by mutual agreement. This way, we can try and understand each other. As yet, we do understand one another, and the meetings progress. As soon as something is not understood, a clarification is asked for.

Another striking element is the great need to translate each

topic to one's own situation in the sense of (not) recognizing something and to what degree and in what form. We suspect that some things are somewhat exaggerated.
It is clear that in the past 10 to 15 years improvements in the Collective Labour Agreement have been heavily negotiated to the extent that any deviation from that agreement suggested in the meetings, is immediately turned down without truly thinking it over. The hard-won rules in the Collective Labour Agreement are sacred, and thus cause rigidity and considerably restrict the personal thinking process.

A source of unrest and doubt within the groups are the progressing changes in the care sector. More and more protocols, together with made-to-measure care and individual care budgets make the participants stand their ground. All are opposed to such changes. This may obstruct the progress.

The participants indicate that, at this moment, the dialogue mainly helps them learn how others arrange their work and gain a better picture of their work as a whole. What do we all do, and what are the bottlenecks? A lively practice of mutual learning exists. Many hear for the first time that there are other ways to approach and deal with the work. Also, shared images arise of what should be undertaken within the organization to make the work healthier and more enjoyable. They suggest: bring a halt to the financial cuts and protocols, replace faulty equipment more quickly, allow more room for using one's own initiative and existing qualities, improve communication and deal with the hospitalization problem. We do not know yet whether these suggestions will actually lead to improvements in practice. But they should instigate them.

Age diversity policy: development and appreciation
We notice that the ideas of development and appreciation are a matter-of-course within the organization. We suspect this is connected with the specific situation of a care institution for elderly suffering from dementia. Women dominate. So does the age category of 45 and older. Personnel instruments like career development interviews, personal development plans, education and training are common within this organization. These instruments are broadly applied and also amply utilized by the research subjects. They are thereby used, as much as possible, in keeping with the specific characteristics of the individual employee. For education and training as well as the use of other instruments, the most appropriate route is sought. Criticism from the research subjects asserts that they do develop, but that the organization finds it difficult to handle the newly developed qualities, which leads to insufficient use of potential and the inevitable frustrations.

Topics for discussion

Due to the social dialogue and action research, the research is too broad
It is not always easy to keep a clear focus of the research question. The research is broad and have to be focused on knowledge about self-direction and empowerment of older workers.

Knowledge development through the social dialogue
Is the social dialogue a reliable method to study self-regulation and the effectiveness of the developmental approach of older workers?

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