

# Press Release

## **Learning capability does not decrease with age, lifelong learning imperative to counter demographic change Older workers and their qualities more and more important – age stereotypes and prolonged learning abstinence biggest barriers to lifelong learning**

**London – June 30, 2009.** In the near future, European companies will be faced with a severe lack of skilled labour, with current estimates predicting a 9% decline of the working population by 2030. With a current EU-wide employment rate of people aged 55 to 64 of only 45%, increasing the number of older people working is the only feasible solution to the problem. Employees need to be adequately prepared for this prospect, and continuous maintenance and expansion of their skills through lifelong learning is vital. A recent Adecco Institute White Paper outlines the barriers that need to be overcome, offers insights into the results of transdisciplinary research by cognitive and social scientists at Jacobs University Bremen, and provides clear guidelines for the successful implementation of lifelong learning programmes.

Despite the population prospects and the advantages of fostering talent within a company rather than recruiting new staff, lifelong learning is not a reality within the EU. Employees aged 55 and older are far less likely to participate in further training than their younger colleagues in most European countries, despite surveys showing that they are still interested in expanding their skills.

The Adecco Institute and the co-authors from Jacobs University identified a number of barriers that need to be overcome in order to close the margin in participation. On the employees' side, the biggest obstacles appear to be the perception that given the nearing retirement an investment into skills will not yield returns, and an anxiety about learning, caused by the fact that older employees have not had a formal learning experience for a prolonged period of time.

On the employers' side, the biggest problems are a lack of resources and prevailing age stereotypes. The first problem is predominantly true for small and medium sized enterprises – only 37% of them offer training for employees at all, compared to 95% of large companies. Age stereotypes on the other hand are problematic in businesses of all sizes: a study revealed that learning ability and readiness, flexibility and creativity are all associated with young workers, whereas older workers are ascribed working morale, quality consciousness and loyalty.

Cognitive research shows that these stereotypes have no substance. If older employees are less capable of learning than their younger colleagues, it is caused by a lack of practice, not by age, and the capability can easily be increased. There are however some areas where younger workers have an advantage. They generally enjoy a higher speed of information reception, a better ability to react and they handle time pressure better – all skills that form part of the so-called fluid intelligence. Older workers on the other hand possess higher levels of crystallised intelligence, giving them an advantage at utilising work experience, wisdom and discernment as well as a higher capability for integrative thinking.

“We must overcome outdated conceptions of different age groups’ capabilities and start effectively utilising young and old employees’ specific skills. Lifelong learning must become a reality in its literal sense, meaning a continuous learning process during an entire career and throughout life”, emphasises the Institute’s chairman and former German Minister of Labour and Economics Wolfgang Clement.

To achieve this it is essential that companies create an environment that encourages employees to learn and support them in their efforts. Whilst learning should be self-driven, supervisors have an important role in helping employees identify their training needs and interests as well as being role models. One option is to open up new career paths for employees, which can also be horizontal rather than vertical.

Training offers should be age conscious. Young and old employees have different requirements and it is important to keep their specific strengths and weaknesses in mind. As a general rule, older employees appreciate less formal learning environments and might need time to re-develop their learning potential. However, to facilitate intergenerational skill exchange, there should always be a point of contact between older and younger employees both in the workplace and in training environments.

To overcome the specific problems of small and medium sized enterprises, the Adecco Institute proposes that such companies should form training networks with other companies and public and private training providers. If such networks are successful, they can provide employees with an abundance of training offers while not straining companies’ resources. The white paper identifies steps to establish successful cooperation and public-private partnerships, thereby providing valuable input for companies and policymakers.

Finally, the white paper introduces learning accounts as a viable tool for training management. One big obstacle to lifelong learning is that during economic upswings, employees are often too busy to participate in trainings, whereas during downturns companies lack the resources to offer trainings. Through consistent management of training offers, the ideal solution anti-cyclical training can become viable. If there was an appropriate policy framework, this system could be expanded to combine training offers by various providers, leading to an Erasmus style European network of training provisions.

The entire white paper, which provides an in-depth innovative insight into the topic of lifelong learning, is available on [www.adecco.com](http://www.adecco.com).

Direct link:

[http://institute.adecco.com/Research/Articles/Pages/LLL2009\\_World\\_EN.aspx](http://institute.adecco.com/Research/Articles/Pages/LLL2009_World_EN.aspx)

### **About the Adecco Institute**

The Adecco Institute, founded in 2006 and based in London, is a think tank on the future of work; it is committed to facilitating discussions on the topic of work. Through primary and secondary research as well as white papers and forums for discussion, the Adecco Institute provides forward-looking approaches to help companies and economies raise employability, productivity and employee satisfaction at work.

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