

## Addressing the challenges of an aging workforce

*A human capital perspective for companies operating in Europe*



*An IBM Institute for Business Value executive brief*

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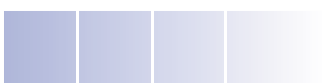
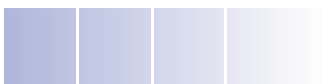
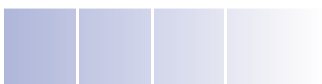
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**“It is not an overstatement to say that the demographic situation regarding the ageing workforce is one of the most pressing issues confronting Europe today.”<sup>1</sup>**

– Anders L Johansson

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## Introduction

Many European countries are wrestling with a common challenge: the graying of their populations. Because they built their economies using a labor force fueled by one of the largest demographic booms in history, both European governments and organizations that operate in European countries are now faced with addressing the challenges of an aging workforce. While many countries around the world are facing this situation, generous state pensions and declining birthrates over the years have further exacerbated this issue in many European nations.

The aging of the existing workforce, combined with shrinking pools of new employees, poses a number of problems for a range of organizations, particularly those in the public sector and in mature industries such as petroleum and chemicals, mining, and aerospace and defense. First, many companies are finding it increasingly difficult to hire new employees within certain disciplines. Then, even if they can find qualified candidates, the firms must still invest in training to further increase their productivity. For example, in a 2002 study of over 500 German companies, 23 percent stated that the aging of their workforces represented a problem for their organizations.<sup>2</sup> In addition, 39 percent indicated they were facing challenges associated with shortages of qualified labor, and 27 percent stated they needed to focus on additional training.<sup>3</sup> These shortages can place key capabilities at risk, as indicated by an HR executive of a major chemicals firm:

*Last year we needed twenty-five chemical engineers in one country. But of the total pool of graduates, there who had the capabilities to work in a global operation, there were maybe eighty, and we got only three.<sup>4</sup>*

A less visible, but no less dangerous problem, is the loss of expertise resulting from mature workers leaving the organization without passing on their knowledge to others. As greater numbers of “knowledge workers” retire, they take with them insights about managing key customer relationships, handling exceptions to critical processes and a host of other experiences that can cost organizations significant amounts of time, energy and resources to recreate or replace. More often than not, the transfer of this knowledge is ignored, placing the organization in a position to repeat prior mistakes and expose itself to additional financial and operational risk.

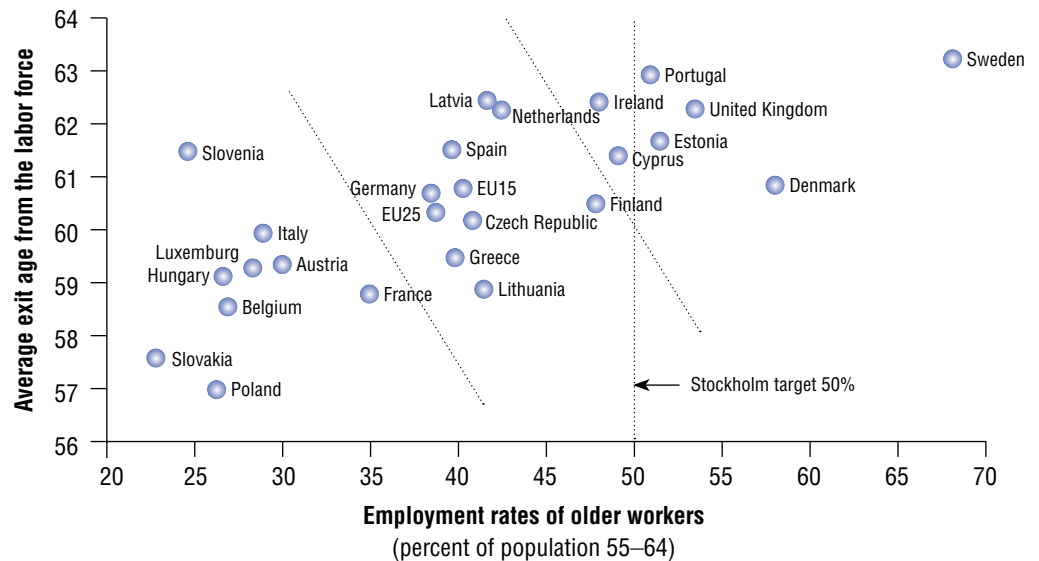
This report examines the impact of changing demographics from the European perspective and how companies across Europe and worldwide are developing innovative solutions to address this issue. In addition, key questions are presented that executives should be answering to make sure that their organizations are prepared to address these new demographic issues.

## The aging workforce: A European perspective

The topic of mature workers continues to gain importance and urgency in European Union (EU) member countries. Over the next two decades, the number of people in the 50–64 age group will increase by 25 percent, while those in the 20–29 year age group will decrease by 20 percent.<sup>5</sup> Over the last several years, the focus of the EU has changed from preventing age discrimination to mobilizing the aging workforce. In recent summits, EU leaders have set two goals to encourage member countries to focus on this aging workforce problem. At the 2001 European Council, EU members agreed on a goal of achieving a 50 percent employment rate for older workers (55–64 years).<sup>6</sup> In 2002, the Barcelona European Council identified the retirement age of older workers as a common European problem and concluded that the exit ages of older workers for each country in the EU should be raised by five years by 2010.<sup>7</sup> A recent report by the Commission of the European Communities indicated that while some advances have been made in reaching these targets, overall, the EU is “still far short of both targets, and much stronger efforts are needed to make the necessary progress towards both targets.”<sup>8</sup>

Figure 1 summarizes the current status of the 25 European Union countries with respect to their progress toward the Stockholm and Barcelona targets as of 2002.

**Figure 1. Status of EU countries regarding progress toward targets for aging workers.<sup>9</sup>**

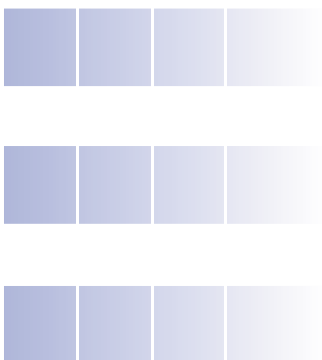


Note: EU15 = European Union of 15 members (before enlargement); EU25 = European Union of 25 members (after enlargement).

Two important factors have promoted the trend toward early retirement in European countries. First, the combination of state pension plans, coupled with early retirement and other social programs made it relatively attractive for individuals to retire early. In addition, companies looking to reduce headcount in European countries have traditionally offered early retirement packages as a way of avoiding layoffs. In many ways, early retirement was seen by governments and companies as a way of mitigating the impact of high unemployment, as less expensive younger workers were able to move into jobs vacated by older employees.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, a recent EU study showed that while approximately 33 percent of all retired individuals between the ages of 55–64 indicated they left their last jobs or business as part of normal retirement, almost 20 percent (or three million people per year) cited early retirement as the main reason.<sup>11</sup> From a short-term perspective, both employers and employees appeared to have benefited from this arrangement, as retiring employees received benefits while employers avoided the expensive costs of involuntary layoffs and were able to replace retiring employees with lower-cost workers. However, in the long run, early retirements can be damaging as individuals with significant experience and capability are encouraged to leave the workforce, often without any thought as to how their knowledge can be preserved.

Some countries, such as the United Kingdom (UK), have begun to reverse this trend and encourage the hiring and retention of mature workers. In 1999, the UK government launched a Code of Practice on Age Diversity, which provides guidelines for businesses to prevent age discrimination in recruitment, selection, training and development, redundancy and retirement.<sup>12</sup> Also, in March 2000, the UK government introduced a program entitled “New Deal 50+” to raise employment among older workers. Two core elements of this program include a £1500 Training Grant for preparing older workers to reenter the workforce and a Working Tax Credit, which directly pays between £40–60 per week, tax-free, to older workers to supplement their existing wages.<sup>13</sup> In addition, nongovernmental organizations such as Age Concern, the Employers Forum on Age and the Third Age Employment Network are involved in providing resources to both companies and workers regarding the benefits of the aging workforce.



### *What should companies do?*

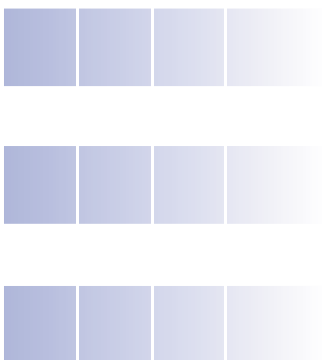
Based on our research and working with companies on their workforce strategies, we recommend that companies consider the following six strategies for addressing the challenges of an aging workforce:

- Redirect recruiting and sourcing efforts to include mature workers
- Retain valued employees through developing alternative work arrangements
- Preserve critical knowledge before it walks out the door
- Provide opportunities for workers to continually update their skills
- Facilitate the coexistence of multiple generations in the workforce
- Help ensure that mature workers are able to use technology effectively in the workplace.

#### **Redirect recruiting and sourcing efforts to include mature workers**

Given the shift in workforce demographics, companies are quickly finding shortages of workers from labor pools where they normally would draw younger employees. ASDA, the UK's largest retailer, has recognized the value of attracting mature workers on a part-time basis.<sup>14</sup> The company has over 20,000 employees who are over 50 years old, representing 19 percent of its workforce. ASDA conducts over-50 workshops at local job recruitment centers in the UK for anyone interested in continuing to work, not just those interested in working for ASDA. They also provide a number of flexible benefits targeted toward mature workers such as "Benidorm leave" (three months unpaid leave between January and March) and "Grandparent leave" (a week unpaid leave after the birth of a grandchild). Recently, the company opened a store in the UK where 40 percent of the associates were over age 50. ASDA has found this focus on aging workers provided a number of organizational benefits. For example, stores with a higher proportion of older workers have absenteeism rates less than a third of ASDA'S average rate.<sup>15</sup> Also, in March 2003, ASDA was selected as 1 of Britain's top 10 companies to work for, and the UK's best company for flexible working.<sup>16</sup>

Attracting mature workers does not have to be limited to entry-level positions. Westpac, a major financial services institution based in Australia, was looking to increase its presence in the financial advising market. To accomplish this, it trained approximately 900 recruits who were over 55 years of age and looking to establish a second career. Noel Purcell, Westpac's general manager of stakeholder communications, noted that these older workers became an important asset because they related well with older customers, who sometimes felt that younger staff were not experienced enough to address their financial concerns.<sup>17</sup>

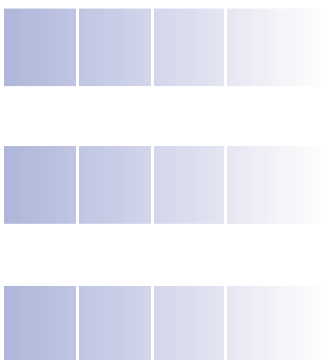


Other examples of companies interested in sourcing older knowledge workers from outside their organizations are Procter & Gamble (P&G) and Eli Lilly.<sup>18</sup> Together, they are the initial sponsors of YourEncore.com, a contracting agency focused on attracting retired research scientists, engineers and product developers who want to work on a project-by-project basis. Retirees are hired by YourEncore.com and are provided with marketing, accounting and administrative support. At the same time, YourEncore.com works closely with sponsoring companies to identify opportunities to use these resources on a part-time basis.<sup>19</sup> As sponsoring companies, P&G and Eli Lilly obtain access to a range of experienced personnel that they can tap into on an as-needed basis.

### **Retain valued employees through developing alternative work arrangements**

While some companies are recruiting aging workers, other companies are developing alternative work arrangements to try to hold onto employees before they walk out the door. One organization that has made a commitment to retaining workers after they reach retirement age is the Aerospace Company, a U.S. defense contractor. It developed a Retiree Casual program, where retirees can work on a project-consulting basis for up to 1000 hours per year and earn roughly the same base salary they earned prior to retirement, depending on roles and responsibilities. About 500 Retiree Casuals are eligible to work, while 200 are working at any given time. Most individuals in the program work two days per week, but some work full-time for six months straight. Most of the workers in this program are in their mid-sixties, but some continue into their eighties. The program has proven beneficial not only for the participants, but also for the company as a whole. As George Paulikas, a retired executive vice president and a program participant said, "The Retiree Casual program keeps expertise around and helps transfer it to others. People often remark that we don't have many consultants around here. Actually, we do, but they are called retirees, and they already know the business inside out."<sup>20</sup>

In addition to retaining workers using part-time work schedules, companies should also explore, when appropriate, the use of telecommuting as a way of encouraging mature workers to remain with the organization. Avoiding the time, costs and difficulties associated with commuting full-time can be a powerful incentive for individuals, particularly where traffic and weather conditions make regular travel inconvenient. While telecommuting can provide challenges in terms of social isolation and difficulty in coordinating remote activities, a regular schedule of office visits, coupled with appropriate training and support for remote workers, can help overcome these hurdles.



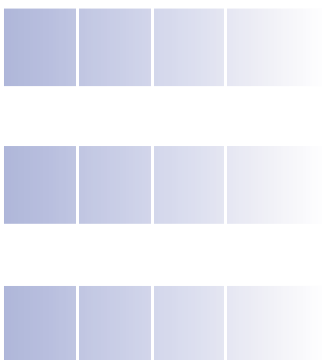
### **Preserve critical knowledge before it walks out the door**

When individuals leave an organization, the organization often loses a career's worth of experiential knowledge. This can range from e-mails, reports and documents that employees have accumulated, to tacit knowledge about how to do their jobs effectively. Too often, this knowledge leaves the organization without any attempt to identify, capture and share it with others. As a result, remaining employees often search futilely for answers to questions that have already been answered, recreate analyses that have been conducted many times over or simply fail to heed previously learned lessons that were never formally identified and captured.

A number of firms have focused on techniques to stem this hemorrhage of corporate insight.<sup>21</sup> One set of techniques focuses on eliciting the experiential, or tacit, knowledge of employees. Through detailed interviewing and/or documentation, companies are trying to capture these insights in an explicit form that can be stored for future use. Other companies have tried mentoring arrangements and fostering communities of practice to encourage mature workers to pass down the knowledge from their generation to the next. This type of knowledge exchange can be especially useful when the decision rules and experiences cannot be easily captured or written down without losing the essence of the knowledge.

Bosch, a German provider of automotive, industrial and consumer products, introduced an interesting method for retaining critical knowledge in the organization. Older workers who possess critical knowledge and are about to retire are asked to take part in a special program. Prior to retirement, these employees fill in a form about the knowledge they gained during their careers. This information is synthesized and captured in a database used by project managers around the world. If these project managers have a difficult project that requires specialist knowledge, they can search the database to determine if there are retired workers that fit their needs. These people are then asked to work for a short period of time during the project and support the team by bringing in knowledge gained during their previous tenure with the company.<sup>22</sup>

To retain valuable experiences, share lessons learned, expand the organization's knowledge base and improve operational and product quality, The World Bank captures videos and audiotapes of selected individuals and groups involved in challenging projects. Using storytelling techniques, the Bank seeks to uncover new knowledge from the practitioners in developing countries. Interviewees are encouraged to focus on telling stories, rather than providing general observations,





so the material will be more interesting for the intended audiences. This knowledge retention initiative uses subject matter experts to conduct interviews, as well as to screen and edit the videos and audiotapes, pushing relevant insights and content to audiences through a variety of media.<sup>23</sup>

In concert with its well-conceived elicitation technique, The World Bank's knowledge dissemination process also contributes to its success. Both audio and videotaped interviews are posted to a Web site and burned onto CD-ROMs, with any documents referred to during the interview appearing as hot links in the final text. The World Bank also pushes these debriefings to a distribution list of targeted members, rather than simply passively posting them on the Internet. For reinforcement, they also make interviewees available for follow-up and mentoring.<sup>24</sup>

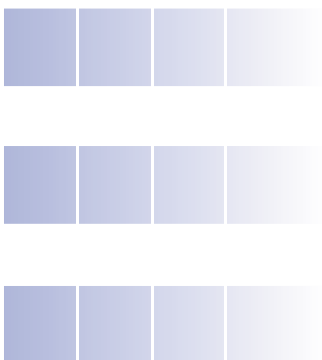
### **Provide opportunities for workers to continually update their skills**

Executives are recognizing the need to refresh the skills of those workers whose formal training may have ended years, if not decades, earlier. Lufthansa, the German airline, recognized that many of its older workers were not participating in learning activities. An annual evaluation of its training showed that the company had not offered systematic training opportunities for older workers for more than 10 years. To address the learning needs of managers older than 45, the company started an initiative called the "Added Experience Program."<sup>25</sup>

The objectives of this program are threefold: to transfer informal skills that have not been taught and that are necessary in the working environment, to create a dialogue among participants that facilitates the exchange of valuable experiences and enables managers to increase the size and scope of their personal networks, and to allow top management to learn about, and tap into, the know-how these experienced managers brought to the table. The program lasts for one year and consists of a number of one-week modules. The participants stay in the same cohort throughout the year to build a level of trust that is needed to share lessons learned and good practices.

### **Facilitate the coexistence of multiple generations in the workforce**

Age is often overlooked when addressing the subject of employee diversity. Yet, the viewpoints and perceptions of different age groups can present significant barriers in a workforce where age differences can span 40 years or more. For example, preconceived biases about the willingness of older workers to learn and embrace new technologies can limit their opportunities, discouraging mature workers from refreshing their skills. At the same time, younger workers may be perceived as not willing to "pay their dues" before advancing in the company. This can dampen the enthusiasm of new employees and result in low morale and early attrition.



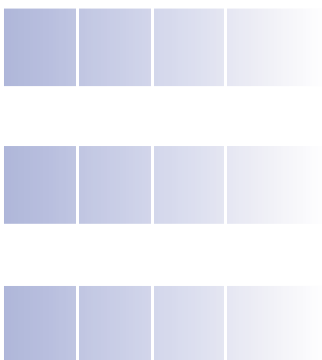
Her Majesty's Land Registry (HMLR) in the UK provides an example of an organization that recognized the importance of balancing the different needs, interests and work styles of different generations. An organization of about 10,000 employees responsible for managing the recordkeeping of real estate deeds in England and Wales, HMLR recognized that it needed to review and raise its staffing levels to meet increasing demand for services. An extensive demographic segmentation exercise across the whole organization confirmed a decline in recruitment of 16–24 year olds, as well as a difficulty in filling some vacancies. Further research showed that many managers held “stereotyped attitudes,” and that the organization was focusing much of its recruitment resources solely on attracting younger workers.<sup>26</sup>

To address the issue, HMLR took a number of actions, including:<sup>27</sup>

- Monitoring age profiles by local office and grade level every six months
- Monitoring recruitment and promotion decisions to prevent age discrimination
- Incorporating age profiling results into the annual diversity report
- Engaging key business unit managers in its age diversity challenges
- Creating a mandatory diversity training program for managers (with scenarios and role-playing) designed to address age-related issues as well as other diversity challenges.

HMLR recently won an Age Positive award from the UK Department of Work and Pensions for its analytical approach to addressing the multigenerational workforce.<sup>28</sup>

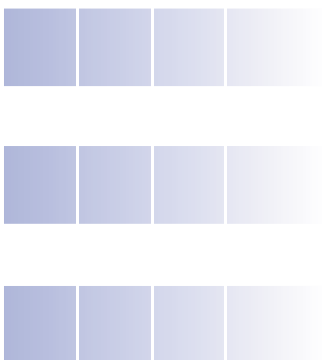
Some companies have engineered ways to bring together older and younger workers to leverage their respective talents. For example, General Electric, at the dawn of the e-commerce era, matched 500 of its most senior managers with junior employees to learn about the potential for Internet technologies. The “junior” mentors and the “seniors” were paired based on knowledge and personality traits, and then spent two to four hours per week together, discussing the ins and outs of the World Wide Web. As a result of this process, the senior executives gained new insights that were critical to moving their businesses into the Internet age, while the junior employees were able to gain access to a network of executives that, under normal circumstances, would be difficult to obtain.<sup>29</sup>



## **Help ensure that mature workers are able to effectively use technology in the workplace**

One of the primary misperceptions of many employers is that older workers have more difficulty learning and adopting new technologies. However, a number of research studies have demonstrated that age alone is not directly linked to the adoption of computer use in the work environment.<sup>30</sup> For example, a recent case study involving mature workers at the UK retailer Tesco found that, while not all older workers were initially comfortable using new technologies, many quickly adapted to it. Motivation was cited as one of the primary drivers for adopting new technologies. As one manager stated, the mature workers were the ones “studying the literature, making use of telephone help-lines and suffering the restless nights making sure they could do the job.”<sup>31</sup>

However, organizations should be cognizant of two issues related to the use of technology by mature workers. First, organizations need to consider the accessibility requirements of older workers. As individuals age, it may become more difficult to decipher smaller typefaces on a screen, understand the audio portion of a streaming video, or control the hand motions necessary to use a computer mouse or similar devices requiring precise movements. When designing systems, companies need to address the needs of potential user groups and provide alternative mechanisms for accessing, displaying and manipulating Web pages and other applications. Furthermore, organizations need to evaluate the strategies associated with rolling out and training older workers on new applications. Organizations should consider building a cadre of influence leaders to demonstrate to older workers that they are capable of learning the new technologies, and build in ample practice opportunities to build comfort and confidence among individuals who have less experience in using the technology.<sup>32</sup>



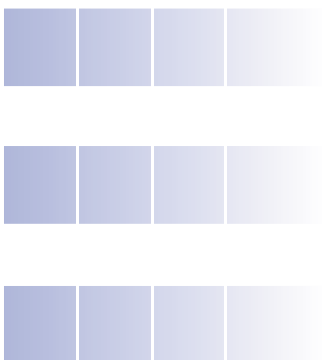
## ***Moving forward***

Given the changing composition of the workforce in the next 5 to 10 years, the following questions can help companies identify key HR requirements to avoid potential pitfalls and proactively address related issues:

- Does your company have a detailed understanding of its employee demographics, and of what key positions or job categories may be at risk in the near future?
- Has your company identified potential opportunities for attracting and retaining mature workers using part-time or alternative work arrangements?
- To what extent is retraining mature workers part of your company's overall learning and development strategy?
- Does your company have a strategy in place to preserve critical knowledge before it walks out the door?
- How effectively are age-related issues addressed within your company's overall diversity strategy?
- To what extent does your company address the accessibility needs of employees when designing or implementing new software?

## ***Conclusion***

The challenges associated with the maturing workforce often do not garner much executive attention. Like an individual suffering from hypertension, an organization with an aging workforce often feels no symptoms for many years. However, as the situation advances, companies will soon realize the pain associated with losing expertise, incurring higher recruiting and training costs, and managing intergenerational concerns. Firms need to take a proactive approach to address demographic changes, both within their organizations and across their labor markets, to avoid issues that could significantly hamper companies in the industrialized world.



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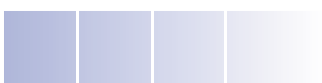
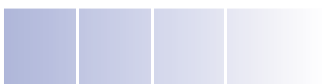
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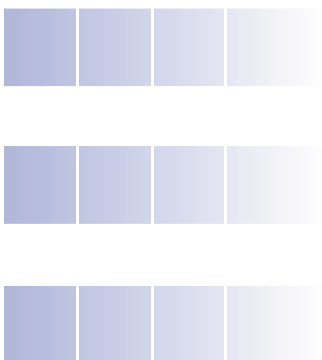
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