

AGE MANAGEMENT AND FLEXIBLE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Kateřina Legnerová – Daniela Černá

Abstract

The article analyses the usage of flexible work practices in implementing age management. In SHRM's 2013 Workplace Forecast, the most significant percentage of HR executives (40 percent) cited flexible work arrangements as the most effective strategy for attracting and retaining talented workers of any age in the next ten years (Paullin, 2014). The demographic development in the Czech Republic and the process of population aging represents an essential task for employers. The main objective of the research was to map out companies' current approaches to support employees' aging and intergenerational coexistence in the workplace by offering practical benefits. The quantitative research was carried out in an online questionnaire survey, and the research sample represented 288 respondents. The main hypotheses were that the larger companies offer more benefits for supporting the older employees than the small and middle firms. The hypothesis was confirmed partly. The findings in the research show that businesses support different approaches to generations and offer work flexibility, but the correlation is not linear according to the number of offered benefits and the size of the company.

Key words: age management, flexible working environment, work flexibility

JEL Code: J14, J32

Introduction

The paper analyses the usage of flexible work practices as a part of the benefits of implementing age management. In SHRM's 2013 Workplace Forecast, the most significant percentage of HR executives (40 percent) cited flexible work arrangements as the most effective strategy for attracting and retaining talented workers of any age in the next ten years (Paullin, 2014).

The demographic development in the Czech Republic and the process of population aging represents an essential task for employers. Gradual aging of the workforce will bring

changes in access to groups of employees according to their age, as well as more flexible possibilities to exploit their potential and work performance arrangement.

1 Age management and employee benefits

The age for retirement in the Czech Republic is 65 years (valid in 2022). Before reaching the retirement age, for many employees it is necessary to change the workload or even change a profession. The most affected group of workers are employees in physically demanding professions who can lose performance at an older age. Between HRM approaches, policies, and instruments – continuous education of older employees – seems to be extremely important when striving to prolong employees' working life. Up-to-date knowledge improves older workers' workability and enables people to remain "employable" (Znidarsic, 2012). Bran, Popescu and Stanciu (2016) confirmed the need to (re)train employees, no matter if young, old or too old. The support and fair approach to the older employees are parts of the social pillar of corporate social responsibility in every company (Szewczyk, 2018).

Numerous research institutes across the world deal with the topics of age, ageing and older people, even though age research institutes focusing on "economics", are still an exception in Europe (Meiners, 2014). Eurofound defines the ability to work even at a later age as active aging. Active aging is about optimizing opportunities for workers of all ages to work in good quality, productive and healthy conditions until legal retirement age, based on mutual commitment and motivation of employers and workers (Eurofound, 2018). In 2012 the Council of the European Union issued the Declaration on the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations (2012): The Way Forward. The declaration recommends step-by-step support for the employment of older workers and promotes intergenerational cooperation. In their study, Fuertes, Egdell, and McQuaid (2013) cite the definition of age management as measures that combat age barriers while also promoting age diversity.

The question of who exactly fits into the category of older workers is highly debatable. However, the research on age discrimination show that they are workers over the age of fifty. Regardless of chronological age, it depends primarily on how the employees perceive themselves and whether they consider themselves mature workers. In addition to age, physical, mental, and emotional health, career stage, employment, and quality of life play an essential role in the employment of older people (Paullin, 2004). The benefits offered by the companies support the effectiveness of the older employees. Continuous education and skills

development of older workers seems crucial when enabling older employees to prolong their working lives.

Also, supporting spreading employee benefits for older people could positively impact the development of frailty and its consequences (Avila-Funes, J. A. et al., 2016). We have also to be careful of reverse discrimination. Employee discrimination in hiring or any other way by giving preference because of age between individuals 40 or over can be perceived as positive discrimination (Hatch and Hall, 2003).

Workforce diversity within the Czech Republic supports the platform Business for Society, which brings together companies claiming social responsibility. One of its activities is also an association of companies that have signed the European Charter of Diversity for the Czech Republic (Business for Society). These enterprises are also most often engaged in support of flexible employment for elderly employees. One of the most important ways to support the long-life work is choosing the most suitable and supportive benefits.

The average age of the Czech inhabitants reached 42.8 years in 2021. The aging of the population continued, with the values of the relevant age-forming indicators increasing year on year. The population's age structure in the Czech Republic has an unequal distribution of age generations, which subsequently affects employment. The most numerous generations in the Czech Republic are people born in the 1970s. Employees between the age of 40 - 59 years represent 28 %. By contrast, the generation born between 2000 and 2010 is the weakest (9.5%).

Therefore, the age groups of employees in the Czech Republic will spill over to a higher age. The Czech Statistical Office does not expect an increased rate of job migration. Currently, migrants account for about 3.5% of all populations of the Czech Republic. Based on these demographic effects on the age of employees, businesses will have to innovate access to individual generations of workers. For this reason, we carried out research on this issue.

2 Research

2.1 Objectives of the research

The main objective of the research was to map out companies' current approaches to support employees' aging and intergenerational coexistence in the workplace. Whether and how they

use flexible forms of employment for older employees. The quantitative research was carried out as an online questionnaire survey, and the research sample represented 288 respondents.

The main research question was: How do the companies use employee benefits to support older employees in the workplace?

We set the hypotheses:

1. The big companies offer more benefits than small and middle firms.
2. The foreign owned companies offer more benefits than the Czech owned firms.

2.2 Research approach

The research was conducted in 2020. The Covid influence may be partly involved but not as strong as it would be in the following years. The Covid situation changed the approach to employee benefits and flexible working conditions, and it could not state in our research.

The questionnaire was distributed via social networks, especially Facebook and LinkedIn. The spread of the questionnaire was by a snowball. The respondents resent it to their contacts.

The sample of respondents regarding gender represents 132 men and 156 women, resp. 46% of men and 54% of women. The age distribution was represented mainly by the youngest generation, between 22 and 34 years. See Table 1.

Tab. 1: Respondents, according to the age

Age	Men	Women
22-34	86	84
35-44	24	34
45-54	16	32
55+	6	6

Source: own research

The respondents involved in the research worked mainly in big companies with more than 1 000 employees (38%), and in small companies. See Table 2.

Tab. 2: Respondents, according to size of the company

Number of employees	Number of respondents	Percentage
More than 1 000	108	38%
250 - 999	56	19%
50 - 249	46	16%
Less than 50	78	27%

Source: own research

61% of the total number of respondents worked in a foreign-owned company. 88% of the employees worked for an international company. The minor percentage was employed in a small company with the head office abroad. Most foreign owners were from Germany, Great Britain, France, and the USA. The results are mentioned in Table 3.

Tab. 3: Respondents according to the ownership of the company

Size of the company	Total	Foreign owned	Percentage
More than 1 000	108	95	88%
250 - 999	56	26	46%
50 - 249	46	35	76%
Less than 50	78	21	27%
Total	288	177	61%

Source: own research

2.3 Research results

Based on the findings, the research showed that the companies offer a range of benefits to older employees. 56% of respondents confirmed that in the companies is not a different approach in offering the benefit according to the age. 58% of businesses support careers regardless of the age of employees.

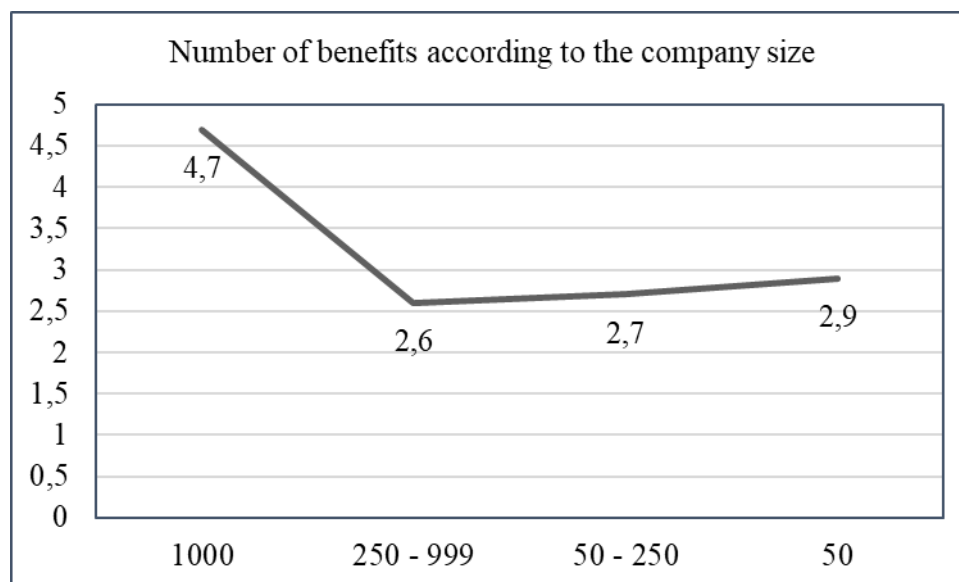
Big companies offer on average 4.7 benefits for older employees. The hypothesis was confirmed.

The distribution of the offered benefits is not linear based on the company size. We provided the correlation between the size of the company and numbers of the benefits.

The correlation coefficient: the result of -0.69029 means a negative correlation between the offered benefits and company size, except for the biggest companies. The Graph 1 shows the distribution of number of benefits among different size of companies.

The research does not confirm the first hypothesis. The distribution of the number of benefits is not linear with the company's size.

Fig. 1: Number of benefits



Source: own research

We also compared the number of benefits offered in the Czech owned companies and the foreign owned firms. The results partly confirmed the hypothesis number two. The foreign owned companies offer more benefits than the Czech owned firms, except of small firms. The correlation between the number of benefits and the company size is more significant in the foreign companies (-0.82) than in the Czech companies (-0.51). The first hypothesis was confirmed in the foreign organizations. See Table 5.

Tab. 4: Number of benefits for older employees

Size of the company	Czech companies	Foreign owned
More than 1 000	4,5	4,9
250 - 999	2,3	2,9
50 - 249	2,7	2,7
Less than 50	3,1	2,7

Source: own research

We also researched the types of offered benefits. The quantitative questionnaire results showed that 65% of the respondents use flexible working hours, mainly offering it for all age

groups. 53% of employers offer a home office. Part-time work support 57% of respondents. Only 26% of businesses allow older workers to move to a more suitable position. Increased health care for older workers supports 13% of businesses and ergonomic workplace equipment.

12% of businesses offer retraining options. Training in intergenerational cooperation provides 24% of the sampled enterprises. 58% of businesses support careers regardless of the age of employees. Research has shown that companies with the foreign owner are more focused on providing flexible work forms.

In quantitative research, 76% of respondents said that the company supports age diversity and is very flexible in this area. However, the research also revealed that more than 16% of respondents said they had witnessed bullying at work or were directly bullied because of age.

Tab. 5: Types of benefits

Benefit	Number of respondents	Percentage
Flexible working hours	188	65%
Part time job	164	57%
Home office	154	53%
More days of holiday	50	17%
More sick days	40	14%
Increased health care	36	13%
Financial support for rehab	44	15%
Ergonomic	36	13%
Requalification	36	13%
Moving to a more suitable position	74	26%

Source: own research

2.4 Limitations of the research

The distribution of respondents' age is not representative. The prevailing age is the young generation. It could be caused by the way the questionnaire was distributed. The research was sent via Facebook and LinkedIn. These channels are used more by the young and middle-aged generation.

The second limitation is that each respondent may not represent one company. Respondents from the same company may be included in the sample. We recommend sending the questionnaire to one representative of each company for further research.

In our research was not space to explore the consequences of eldering employees and its impact to the corporate social responsibility and sustainability. This topic represents a next area of research.

Conclusion

Research in age management has shown that approach to employee ageing and intergenerational cooperation needs significant development. Flexibility and specifically flexible work practices play an important role in the retention and attraction of employees of any age. This research stated that the most often applied approach to support of diversified workforce is flexible working hours, work from home and part-time work. The previously conducted research (Paullin, 2014) confirmed the same results. In the field of health care and retraining, as well as for the development of intergenerational cooperation in the form of training and support, there was identified improvement need within the Czech working environment.

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Contact

Kateřina Legnerov

Prague University of Economics and Business

Winston Churchill Sq. 4, 130 67 Prague 3

katerina.legnerova@vse.cz

Daniela ern

Prague University of Economics and Business

Winston Churchill Sq. 4, 130 67 Prague 3

daniela.cerna@vse.cz