

Austrian ELDERS seminar

The Austrian workshop and dissemination seminar was held on October 1st at the Chamber of Commerce in Vienna (1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.).

Conference topics were the organisational, process-related and institutional requirements for a health-sensitive design of reorganisation processes in enterprises with special emphasis on older employees. Besides presenting the Austrian result of ELDERS, representatives of the social partners had the opportunity to present their view about possibilities and limits for action. Which measures can be taken by prevention and management to lower or even avoid negative effects on health, stress and well-being? Concrete best practice examples were given by two companies (see program agenda at the end of this chapter).

The workshop was attended by about 20 representatives from interest groups and human resource managers which guaranteed an extensive discussion climate. As can be seen in the conference agenda, the workshop had two blocks:

In the first block Mr. Schmid presented the main results of the Austrian national report.

Afterwards the possibilities and limits for action were tackled by employer and employee representatives. Ms. Kaun (representative of the Chamber of Commerce) emphasised that awareness of an ageing workforce is increasing in many Austrian companies, resulting in the establishment of health programs and age-management systems. Specific problems for smaller enterprises were mentioned too. Additionally, she broadened the topic by addressing positive macro-economic effects of a higher labour force participation of older employees on enterprise productivity, financing of the social security system as well as financial relief for the health care system.

Mr. Mitter (representative of the Chamber of Labour) emphasised the long tradition of “golden handshake policies” which created an atmosphere where both sides (i.e. employees and employers) regard early retirement as a common way of leaving the workforce. Furthermore, there are many professions with either physically or emotionally stressful working conditions. Consequently, in his view, management approaches with respect to older employees usually fall short of what is needed most: adapting the workplace environment in general to put employees in the position where they can and want to work longer.

Subsequently, discussion with the audience focussed on the reasons for early retirement and possible systematic approaches (e.g. reform of the disability retirement scheme) that could lead to a higher labour force attainment of older people.

The second block was earmarked for the presentation of two best practice examples of companies:

Mr. Hödl presented the main approach of the Voest Alpine LIFE-program. The company is a large steel producer and has a high share of older employees as well as physically challenging working

conditions especially for blue collar workers. The LIFE-program consists of nutrition programs, physical training offers, addiction prevention, individual health prognosis, special training offers for shift workers and safety programs. Moreover, each employee has to undergo further training (about one week per year) and the knowledge transfer between older and experienced employees and their successors are organised systematically. For all these offers, no age limits apply (e.g. with respect to further training, also employees in their last working year have to attend). A specific management challenge is to find new and less physically challenging jobs for those employees who work in physically demanding environments. Concerning the implementation of LIFE, it proved to be very important that employees had a distinct role in designing it as well as that proposals were implemented immediately as to demonstrate the commitment of the company. According to Mr. Hödl, LIFE is very popular which can be seen by the high participation rates of employees. Yet, LIFE has no real effect when it comes to early retirement. Especially blue collar workers retire at the earliest possible moment. Therefore, Mr. Hödl pointed out that age management has a high potential to improve working conditions but he has doubts as to if it can fundamentally change retirement decisions.

The second best practice example was presented by Mr. Buchmayr from Salzburg AG, a large regional energy supplier. Genera (the acronym for generation management at Salzburg AG) is a general approach to age management and not merely designed for older employees. Basically, the main impetus came from the LIFE-program of Voest Alpine. Its main emphasis is on changing the perceptions and ascriptions of older employees, e.g. alleged diminishing productivity of older employees, their engagement, their further training aspirations etc. As these perceptions and ascriptions exist in both groups, i.e. younger as well as older employees themselves, a holistic approach has to be applied. Therefore, all management activities (including personnel and human resource development) as well as health programs and the like have been analysed under this general approach.

In the discussion with the audience, detailed aspects of both “programs” were further elaborated.

