Europe is ageing. Over the next decade and a half, the proportion of the population which is over 65 will rise from one in five to one in four. In many ways, this represents a great advance in science, medicine, lifestyles and society because it means that many more people are living healthier and longer lives than in any previous times in history. . Twenty years ago, there were five people in work for every one person at retirement age. Today, that ratio is three to one and by 2080, there will be only slightly more than two working aged people supporting one person in retirement.

This creates huge economic and social challenges for businesses, government and trade unions in terms of securing the long term sustainability of pension systems, ensuring skills and labour are available to meet business needs and helping older people pursue endeavours (both in paid work and outside of it) while at the same time supporting young people into work which is secure, fulfilling and provides a decent wage.

Older workers can be an asset for the businesses they work in in terms of filling labour gaps, contributing their skills to business challenges, and passing their knowledge to younger colleagues. In many parts of Europe, older workers are already delaying retirement and many employers are finding new ways to use their older workers experience through for example mentorships and knowledge management. In a survey carried out by the Centre for Research into the Older Workforce, over 80% of people 50+ said that they would be willing to delay their own retirement if they were in work which is rewarding and made good use of their capabilities.

And that really is the key to a workplace active ageing agenda: delivering work which older workers value and is intergenerationally fair. Here in the UK, there are about 1.5 million older people who are in jobs which are below their skills level, has fewer hours than they like or is well below their preferred salary levels. Underemployment is not only tragic for the older person, but represents a huge waste of skills and knowledge for the economy as a whole.

Older workers want a variety of things from work. While some people are happy in the work that they do and want to continue as long as possible, others want new challenges and help making a change in jobs through for example retraining. Many older workers are also carers for grandchildren, elderly relatives and sometimes both and need flexibility to balance home and work responsibilities. Around 2 in five people over 50 in work are living with at least one long term health condition but with some support from their employers in terms of how work is organised they can stay productive. Many simply want the chance to talk with someone- a career adviser or union representive to help them map out their plans before and after retirement.

Social dialogue can help deliver workplaces which can meet the challenges of an ageing labour market. This is why in 2017, European level social partners including Business Europe, ETUC, Eurocadres, CEEP, and the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises agreed a set of principles for delivering workplace active ageing and intergenerational solidarity. This is an agreement to implement national, regional, and company level initiatives to take a life-cycle approach to productive working. In the past, early retirement was a tool which employers, unions and governments used to deal with short term economic challenges like unemployment. All three stakeholders benefited- employers could shed staff with the oldest skills sets, governments could meet full employment targets by shifting older workers into inactivity, and unions could promise older workers routes to early labour market exit while making way for younger staff. Labour economist Bernard Ebinghaus called this a collusion to early retirement since all three stakeholders benefited in the short term even though the policy wasn’t really sustainable in the long term. Today, the challenge is to develop, pilot and embed new approaches to work which can help older workers stay in work which they value while also maintaining career pathways for younger workers.

This training module is meant to help union representatives and managers in meeting this challenge. It is based on research supported by the European Commission in four countries: Italy, Poland, Spain and the UK on workplace active ageing and social dialogue. We spoke with employers and unions in all four countries to learn from their experiences in managing workplace ageing. They shared idea, examples of good practice and processes for starting a dialogue on active ageing which takes into account both the demands of the business and needs of the workers. This training module shares these examples with case studies, interviews with stakeholders, signposting of valuable resources and a community of practice in which union and employer representatives can share ideas with one another. Our target audience is not only the senior manager or national union official, but also the social partners at the workplace level. Often the best ideas come from the shopfloor as union reps and managers work together to solve a problem facing their particular workforces.

We hope you enjoy this training module and learn from it. Before you start, we would like you to take part in a short introductory quiz to gauge your understanding of workplace active ageing.