

Regional educational strategies – methods to promote human resource development in small businesses

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SUMMARY

Over the next few decades, demographic change will cause significant changes in the working population. How businesses prepare for these changes will have a decisive impact on whether this transformation has a beneficial or detrimental effect on the economy. Small and medium-sized businesses do not possess the resources required to develop and implement sustainable human resource strategies and thus face particularly significant challenges. This article aims to outline the strategies that small and medium-sized businesses can implement to avert the dangers facing personnel management in the future. Expanding training advisory services and developing regional networks play a pivotal role here. While training advisory services can help to develop and implement the necessary measures, regional networks can support this implementation.

Demographic change and the challenges facing small and medium-sized businesses

Demographic change and the resulting shifts in the age structure of the working population will become ever more apparent in the years to come. On the one hand, the age of employees will rise and, on the other hand, companies will find it increasingly difficult to satisfy their demand for relevant qualifications and competences. European companies must remain competitive on the global market with an increasingly ageing workforce. To cope with the challenges posed by demographic change, the EU aims to increase the employment rate of 55- to 64-year-olds to over 50 % by 2010, thereby extending the average working life of employees and thus safeguarding the European Economic Area's skilled labour base (see European Council, 2001). As a result of changes to national legislation, and not least the positive economic conditions of the last few years, the goals of the European Employment Strategy appeared to be within reach. Since 1996 the employment rate of the over-50s in the EU-27 rose from 36.3 % to 45.8 % in the second quarter of 2008 ⁽¹⁾ (see Massarelli and Romans, 2008, p. 3). It remains to be seen how this figure will develop in view of the difficulties in the current and more difficult economic climate.

In order to ensure a rise in the employment rate of the older population of working age it is essential to sustain their employability until they reach retirement age. Employability means 'a person's capacity to offer his or her manpower as a worker on the basis of his or her expertise, occupational competence, ability to create value and be productive, and thus enter the workforce, retain his or her job and, where necessary, seek new employment' (see Blanke; Roth; Schmid, 2000). According to this statement, the concept of employability is not solely defined by the employee's performance in the workplace. Possessing excellent working skills alone does not suffice to guarantee a worker's survival on the labour market. Therefore it is also necessary to take into account the requirements of jobs on the labour market above and beyond the specific demand of the current employer (see Naegele, 2005, p. 214).

⁽¹⁾ The employment rates in the EU-27 differ greatly in terms of gender, level of education and the percentage of those working part-time. A person is classified as employed if they are engaged in some kind of employment for more than one hour a week (see Massarelli and Romans, 2008).

Faced with an ageing working population, employees must remain in employment for longer in order to safeguard the skilled labour base in a sustainable manner. Thus, in view of demographic change, extending a person's average working life would seem an obvious choice. However, the pressures of working life present an obstacle to this strategy. Employees in the EU-27 feel they are exposed to dangers in the workplace (27 %) and an increase in the intensity of labour, in terms of the pace of work and time pressures (see Parent-Thirion et al., 2008). The risks associated with this cannot be counteracted by healthcare and fitness courses alone. Various pilot projects and pilot studies have demonstrated that well-thought-out training and development processes can counteract these risks (see Ilmarinen and Tempel, 2002; Naegele and Walker, 2007; Gottwald and Knapp, 2008). In view of this, the significant reduction in in-company vocational continuing training in the last few years is problematic. These cutbacks are demonstrated by various statistics ⁽²⁾:

- On average, participation across the EU in continuing training financed by companies has dropped recently. In 1995, 30 % of employees participated in this form of continuing training. After a temporary rise in 2000 to 30.6 %, the figure fell to 27.3 % in 2005 (European Foundation, 2005, p. 5). Even though participation in continuing training programmes rose in 2007 in terms of continuing training days from 11.4 in 2005 to 13.6, the fact remains that participation in continuing training remains relatively low (see Eurostat, 2009). This statement also applies to individual countries such as Germany, where 30 % of employees participated in job-related continuing training in 1997. In 2003 and 2007 this figure stagnated at 26 % (see von Rosenblatt and Bilger, 2008);
- As the CVTS 3 supplementary survey demonstrates, figures concerning continuing training vary greatly across Europe. While over 40 % of employees in Scandinavian countries participate in continuing training programmes, this figure is below 20 % in several new acceding countries, putting them at a major

⁽²⁾ Although various surveys have been conducted, no up-to-date statistics are available on participation in and funding for continuing training programmes. The third Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS 3) is based on data from the reference year 2005. The European Foundation's follow-up study (CVTS 4) will commence in 2010. The Adult Education Survey (AES) is based on data collected up until 2007 and thus represents the most up-to-date data pool. This survey will be mandatory for all Member States from 2011. The lack of up-to-date data and the lengthy intervals between the reporting periods could warrant critical assessment.

disadvantage. All the same, the 33 % average in the EU-27 countries indicates that two-thirds of employees do not participate in continuing training (see Eurostat, 2009);

- The currently worsening economic climate has led to debate on increases in State funding for continuing training. While this will result in a boost in participation rates, it will prompt companies to cut back on funding of initial and continuing training even further, a trend which goes back as far as 1995;
- In-company continuing training is still rare in small companies and for particular target groups, such as the poorly qualified, migrants, women or older workers (see Bellmann, 2008). In this context, it is particularly noteworthy that younger workers by far outnumber older workers in continuing training programmes, and this is the case in nearly all European countries (OECD, 2008, p. 398). Skilled personnel who have completed vocational training or a university degree and are employed in a company with a workforce of over 250 are particularly overrepresented (see European Foundation, 2005).

Safeguarding the employability of the workforce in a sustainable manner demands extensive and long-term efforts on the part of businesses. When they recognise that maintaining their employees' performance levels is also in their interests, businesses are increasingly prepared to undertake these efforts. There are many reasons which make this a judicious approach (see Naegele and Walker, 2007, pp. 7-9). Firstly, faced with the shortage of skilled labour arising from demographic factors (see The Gallup Organization, 2007, p. 25) it is not only necessary to recruit employees from all sections of the working age population, but also to help employees maintain their performance. Secondly, elimination of State aid to those leaving employment can result in employees remaining in companies for longer periods. Thirdly, businesses rediscover the potential and characteristics particular to older employees. A knowledge society increasingly requires integrative competences such as the ability to work with others, experience-based knowledge, being able to make decisions and act autonomously and possessing an awareness of quality (see Brandenburg and Domschke, 2007, p. 83; Frerichs, 2005, p. 51). In spite of the view of personnel managers that these competences are more prevalent in experienced employees, their competences are still significantly underexploited in businesses (see Gottwald and Keck, 2008, p. 97).

In this regard it is necessary to invest in the employability of staff to enable them to adapt their skills in line with technical and organisational requirements. This results in enhanced flexibility and performance and thereby boosts operational productivity (see Bellmann, 2008). In spite of the fact that sustainable human resource management is, in principle, in the interest of businesses, its implementation can often be problematic. While large businesses have their own department with designated skilled workers and considerable resources for human resource development measures at their disposal, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) ⁽³⁾ lack the necessary resources in temporal, personnel and structural terms (see Bellmann, 2008). SMEs particularly face the following problems:

- As a result of short internal decision-making processes, SMEs are able to run their operations in a flexible manner. However, the advantages of their open structure at a functional level become a disadvantage when they have to make information- and knowledge-based decisions about the future which comprise long-term and complex human resource planning (see Stahl and Schreiber, 2003, p. 103 et seq.). This means that the organisational structure which guarantees the success of the SME impedes the systematic development of sustainable human resource management. Accordingly, the shortage of resources in terms of time and personnel in SMEs can make it incredibly difficult to plan and realise comprehensive strategies adjusted to individual needs. In explicit terms, the problem lies in the fact that there is often a lack of necessary expertise to support a systematic age management (see Döring, 2008, p. 167; Stahl and Schreiber, 2003, p. 109 et seq.);
- Secondly, SMEs may fail to implement measures because comprehensive measure packages tie up financial and personnel resources. When order books are empty, companies lack the financial means to invest in continuing training and healthcare measures for employees. During times of economic prosperity, on the other hand, manpower is stretched to such an extent that employees are tied up in work processes and they lack the time to participate in continuing training measures (see Hölbling, 2007, p. 6). As such volumes of work often have limited time-frames,

⁽³⁾ According to the European Union's definition, small and medium-sized enterprises employ fewer than 250 workers and have an annual turnover not exceeding EUR 50 million or an annual balance sheet not exceeding EUR 43 million. Partner companies or affiliated companies are not included in these calculations.

companies shy away from undertaking the time-consuming and cost-intensive business of recruiting external skilled personnel – in particular when there are so few skilled personnel who possess the necessary qualifications. Even if it is possible to plan comprehensive human resource development strategies, it is often not possible to implement them.

SMEs require support as they are not in a position to realise strategically oriented human resource management which is tailored to individual company needs and addresses the challenges of demographic change. Without this support, SMEs are more susceptible to the effects of demographic change than large companies. The disadvantage they are under compared with their larger competitors is already apparent in the recruitment of skilled personnel (see The Gallup Organization, 2007, p. 25).

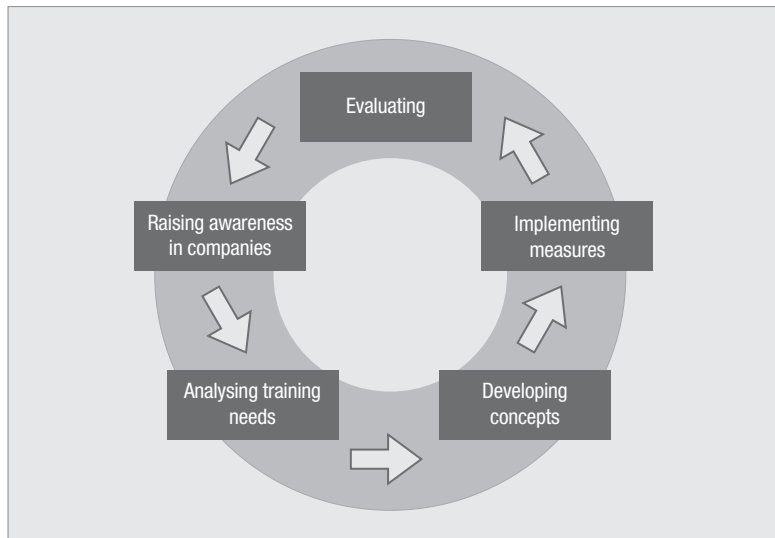
The following sets out two strategies which can help SMEs achieve the aim of sustainable human resource practices. Firstly, training advisory services can be used to complement human resource development processes. To this end it is necessary to enhance the profile of training advisory services, promote the services they provide and make their benefits more transparent (section 2). Secondly, regional networks can provide key structures and partners to help realise measures, some of which may be complex in nature (section 3). Following the discussion of these solution strategies, the article goes on to look at the way the measures can supplement one another (section 4).

Training advisory services

Training advisory services help SMEs realise target-oriented and systematic in-company continuing vocational training (see Löffelmann 2009). The role of training advisory services, however, goes far beyond that of a middleman, as they flank the process of in-company training. 'They aim to make the diverse range of providers, topics and methods in continuing training more transparent and manageable and to link continuing training more closely with corporate objectives.' (See Döring, 2008, p. 168) Accompanying the training process encompasses a number of tasks, ranging from raising awareness among company players with regard to analysing training requirements and developing concepts, to implementing the measures and the subsequent continuing training assessment (see Fig. 1). The fields of activity

involved in training advisory services systematically build upon each other inasmuch as each step forms the basis of the subsequent step. It is a cyclical process as the evaluative impact analysis of continuing training measures can be used as the foundation for embarking on a renewed training process (see Döring et al., 2008).

Figure 1. **The training advisory services consultation process**
(see Döring et al., 2008, own diagram)



In so far as training advisory services support the process of in-company continuing vocational training as a flanking measure, they can be regarded as a key strategy for supporting SMEs in continuing vocational training matters (see Döring et al., 2008). As demonstrated, the obstacle facing many SMEs is their lack of competences in the field of human resource development. Training advisory services lay claim to eliminating this deficit in companies and thus differ from learning and vocational advisory services, which are geared towards individual players (see Cedefop; Sultana, 2004). Whereas these types of guidance focus on individual learning requirements and educational biographies, training advisory services primarily take into account training processes that will produce sustainable benefits for companies. In a similar way to learning and vocational advisory services, training advisory services are provided by external service providers. These advisory services may only be developing at a gradual pace, but it is already clear that consulting

firms, associations and chambers are generally aware of this field's potential. Education service providers also see potential new market opportunities, a point which will be elaborated upon later. This may result in conflicts of interest and thus warrants critical examination (see Döring et al., 2008, p. 16).

As external service providers, training advisory services must possess great skill if they are to gain a foothold within companies as – in practice – businesses often fail to recognise training requirements as such. Problems within companies that could be solved by means of training and competence development are often viewed as technical or organisational problems (see Döring et al., 2008). These complex requirements must be taken into account. The following points are particularly important if training advisory services are to strategically meet the requirements within SMEs. This is not an exhaustive list (see Döring, 2008, pp. 172-188):

- Professionalism: the tasks performed by a training consultant are complex, diverse and thus very demanding. Consultation entails planning, creating and assessing learning processes under market conditions. Expertise from various academic disciplines (e.g. Educational Sciences, Sociology, Business Administration) is just as essential as practical business knowledge and personal skills (e.g. the ability to communicate, reflect and learn). The training consultant's broad-based knowledge enables the planning and conception of effective measures to safeguard employability in the SME, which are needs-based and can be implemented at a strategic level. Only a combination of market knowledge, professionalism and practical expertise can ensure provision of the services required (see Döring, 2008, p. 172-175);
- Far-ranging impact: sustainable human resource management strategies can only have a major impact if they are coordinated with the corporate strategy. This comprises issues concerning human resource planning and development, healthcare and time management and also the company's long-term market positioning. For this reason, it is vital that the consultation addresses the individual needs of the company and develops strategies in close coordination with corporate goals. Introducing far-reaching and sustainable human resource management thus requires close and process-oriented cooperation with the company (see Rump and Eilers, 2007, p. 55);
- Neutrality: Training advisory service providers must be independent if they are to offer consultation that puts the company's interests

first. In particular when those involved in consulting also sell services as education service providers – this perhaps even being their main source of income – obtaining advice that focuses on company needs is not an easy task. In line with this, companies also state in surveys that neutrality is an important attribute for a consultant (see Döring, 2008, pp. 180-175). Nevertheless, it is primarily education service providers which offer training advisory services, as demonstrated by a study of the German education area (see Niedlich et al., 2007, p. 218).

Uniform quality standards allow potential users of training advisory services to gain an overview of the range of continuing vocational training programmes available and guide them in the implementation of measures. Training advisory services which primarily target SMEs must widen their scope and satisfy the necessary quality standards if they are to become a strategy to combat the effects of demographic change. Achieving this will require continuing efforts.

Practical example: training advice as a service for companies

The 'Landesagentur für Struktur und Arbeit Brandenburg GmbH' (LASA) [The Federal Agency for Structural and Employment Affairs] has functioned as a labour-market policy service institute in the German *Land* of Brandenburg since 1991. LASA's wide range of consultancy work and services, needs-based tailored concepts and effective implementation of financial support programmes help the adaptation processes on the labour market. In addition to individuals (employees, jobseekers and the unemployed), it particularly targets SMEs with the aim of providing information on the current situation concerning skilled personnel, identifying needs and raising awareness of the necessary training strategies. Particular emphasis is placed here on the challenges of demographic change. Training advisory services help develop competences and skills in companies, observe the current situation concerning skilled personnel in companies, in the sector and in the region, solve issues regarding retaining skilled personnel when investing in locations or expansion, and provide information on securing funding within the scope of in-company human resource development measures. A comprehensive continuing vocational training database complements these advisory services. It contains well over 15 000 continuing vocational training offers – ranging from short seminars and a combination of e-learning and in-company face-to-face learning phases to longer-term retraining courses for a diverse range of

sectors and professions. This combination of database and training advisory services helps realise innovative human resource and organisational development strategies in this structurally weak German *Land*. Some 300 companies receive training advice each year (see www.lasa-brandenburg.de) [24.09.08].

Regional networks to promote employability in SMEs

The collaboration of various players in networks can result in synergies that help enhance employability in SMEs in a range of fields of activity. In this way, companies, education service providers, business associations, unions, municipal institutions and players from the regional labour market can share their competences. A regional network opens a range of new opportunities to create sustainable human resource management and to develop regional learning cultures (see Hagen, 2006, p. 212). Quality standards here can be safeguarded by the regular application of instruments such as those utilised to analyse requirements. Collaborating with numerous partners makes it possible to extend the respective portfolio of measures and ultimately cuts the cost of integrated continuing vocational education and training measures (see Gnahs, 2004, p. 196; Howaldt, 2001, p. 23). Furthermore, networks can help propagate the benefits of sustainable human resource management with the aim of thus raising awareness of the challenges of demographic change among both managers and employees in SMEs. Information sessions, workshops and regional pilot projects are well-suited to this purpose. This can be supplemented with in-company implementation tools such as age structure analyses, region-specific labour market forecasts, communication strategies, guidelines or job placement services (see www.demotrans.de; www.rebequa.de; www.m-e-z.de [19.03.09]).

Key to a network's success is not only that all participants benefit from working together, but also that the interaction within the network demands a certain level of dependability and that mutual trust develops between the players (see Dobischat, Stuhldreier, Düsseldorf, 2006, p. 80f; Dobischat et al., 2006, p. 30). Companies active in the same market must look beyond their competitive relations and network partners must put aside possible discrepancies arising from conflicting aims. The network can only work effectively if diverging interests

are merged into a common goal. To this end, the various interests must be brought in line with each other (see Hagen, 2005, p. 232; Howaldt, 2001, p. 26). This goal requires a network manager to perform supervisory and organisational tasks, a role which can be adopted by one of the partners. This partner will have an external role as a contact person and an internal role coordinating relations between players. In principle, any partner in the network can adopt this role. However, players whose positions enable them to exert a balancing influence are particularly suited to this role. This is often the case with public institutions, or, depending on the network's structure, associations (see Howaldt, 2001, p. 24 et seq.). Even if a partner assumes an intermediary role, it is still important to retain the network's fundamentally egalitarian structure and transparent decision-making processes (see Dobischat, Stuhldreier, Düsseldorf, 2006; Dobischat et al., 2006, p. 28).

In addition, the partner responsible for coordination can make it easier for future partners to join the network and is a plausible candidate for ensuring that the respective interests are taken into consideration (see Stahl and Schreiber, 2003, pp. 134-136). Regional governments and local authorities can set important benchmarks here and, furthermore, can help networks make the transition from projects to organisations with permanent structures (see European Foundation, 2007, p. 38; Dobischat, Stuhldreier, Düsseldorf, 2006, p. 63). In this respect, they represent important strategic partners as they not only boost general recognition of the network and have financial means at their disposal, but also have insight into long-term structural developments. Regional networks, for their part, are key to long-term structural developments as they can play a significant role in shaping regional and municipal development.

Joint ventures between various regional players 'have the advantage that they create precisely the structures and conditions required for innovation to flourish and are thus able to systematically enhance the innovative power of the partners involved. These types of networks are open to the interests, needs and potential of the various partners and do not make participation subject to any pre-formulated conditions or rules.' (see Stahl and Schreiber, 2003, pp. 69).

Regional networks are structured in such a way that collaboration between players gives rise to new ideas, strategies and structures which correspond to regional needs. The fact that regional players organise the network themselves and are linked to regional structures and processes makes it possible to initiate measures and strategies

which are both target-oriented and recognised (see Dobischat et al., 2006, p. 28 et seq.). Innovations emerge and pilot projects gain stability at the regional level and, as a result, each regional or municipality develops in its own individual manner.

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Practical example: regional networks as a means of supporting in-company training processes

European Union support programmes, in particular the European Social Fund (ESF), grant aid to regional development partnerships that help improve working conditions, eradicate discrimination and promote active ageing (see the Community initiative EQUAL).

Cooperation between social partners, research and educational institutions and State institutions often strengthens SMEs at regional level ⁽⁴⁾. The ESF also allocates funds directly for Article 6 innovative measures with the aim of promoting local employment initiatives via transnational partnerships ⁽⁵⁾. National programmes ⁽⁶⁾ have given rise to regional networks whose primary goal is to safeguard the employability of workers in SMEs in a sustainable manner.

The 'Learning Network Region Rheingau-Taunus' in Germany is one of the networks granted funding. This network provides an example of how companies can safeguard and enhance the employability of workers by cooperating with regional partners. This region offers workshops, organised by the regional continuing vocation training provider, the adult education centre 'Volkshochschule Rheingau-Taunus e.V.', which helps SMEs and public administration implement sustainable human resource management. Managers receive further training on issues concerning human resource practices, while older employees take a direct look at topics relating to the promotion of employability. These training schemes, planned and organised by the network, along with workshops and experience-sharing sessions, specifically equip SMEs to support their (older) workers. The Volkshochschule has a pool of professionally qualified trainers at its disposal who are able to put into practice programmes developed in a target-oriented manner. Needs are defined on the basis of demands formulated by local businesses, regional business development agencies, officials responsible for municipal demographic affairs or by direct consultation of regional players. Strategically important multipliers and regular public relations work via relevant regional media ensure that information is disseminated in a targeted manner. This results in transparent structures in which SMEs can quickly locate contact persons who can provide direct assistance with solving problems or recommend measures to support human resource management. Regional SMEs benefit from this insofar as close networks between regions reduce the interval between identification of needs and implementation of the necessary continuing training measures. The network which, above

⁽⁴⁾ cf. MAYDAY in Poland, AGES ET TRAVAIL in France, OCCUPABILE in Italy, cf. http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/equal/ [24.09.08].

⁽⁵⁾ cf. ARES in Denmark, MATRI in France, CHRONOS in Spain, BASE in Greece, ARTES in Italy, OWLNet in the United Kingdom, cf. European Commission 2007.

⁽⁶⁾ cf. Learning Regions in Germany, FINPAW in Finland, New Deal 50 plus in the United Kingdom, the 11-point programme to improve health in the workplace in Sweden and senior citizen networks in the Netherlands.

and beyond this topic, monitors the entire process from start to finish with regard to educational issues, received funding from the EU via the European Social Fund and from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research within the scope of the ‘Learning Regions’ federal programme (For more information: www.lnr-rtk.de; www.uebergangsmanagement.info) [24.09.08].

Training advisory services in regional networks

Partners in the regional networks can assume the role fulfilled by training advisory services. Regional education service providers often perform this function (see Niedlich et al., 2007, p. 218). While it is likely and possible that conflicts of interest may arise with regard to education service providers providing both neutral advice and selling their own continuing training programmes, the process of exchange within a network keeps this in check. If education service providers are integrated in the network into this way, they can make an important contribution towards sustainable age management (see Stahl and Schreiber, 2003, pp. 111-117). Implementation can be viewed as a cyclical process:

- A training-needs analysis is required in order to plan an individual portfolio of measures (see Geldermann, 2007, p. 32 et seq.). Instruments that can be useful here include age structure analyses, risk analyses or competence inventories (descriptions of these instruments and guides on how to implement them can be found at www.filip-toolbox.de [18.03.2009]). Such instruments can be used to identify and document pressures within the work process. They can be used to anticipate future personnel management developments or to compare employees’ existing competences with current and future needs. These instruments, which can be combined in numerous useful ways, offer a variety of different methods to establish the actual existing training requirements within a company (see Döring et al., 2007);
- The needs analysis must be combined with an effective package of measures which addresses problems facing the company. These must incorporate teaching and learning arrangements geared towards the specific learning requirements of older employees, some of whom will have become unaccustomed to learning. Examples of these kinds of arrangements include personalised, workplace-based or modular forms of learning (see Rump and Eilers, 2007);

- Regional education service providers belonging to the network can carry out the planned measures in close proximity to the company and the workplace. This ensures the direct application of the benefits of continuing vocational training measure content and the realisation of structural and organisational innovations (see Geldermann, 2007). Consultation, concept development and measure implementation all come from the same source. As mentioned previously, the potential for conflicts of interest in the case of service providers offering both consultation and selling their own services within the network warrants critical examination;
- If the structures of this network-based cooperation remain in place in the long-term, education service providers can examine not only the short-term effects but also the long-term achievements of the planned and implemented measures. Checks undertaken at frequent intervals can also establish whether the measures implemented have resulted in sustainable changes and thus whether they have been a success. This type of quality assurance makes it possible to halt potentially undesirable developments at an early stage or cut/modify inefficient measures (see Hartz and Meisel, 2006, p. 7).

This four-stage process to develop out-of-company training consultants creates the conditions required to implement sustainable personnel and age management. Geared towards employees' varying professional and biographical life phases, the individual stages build on each other and can thus help safeguard workers' employability.

Practical example: networking and educational advisory services for SMEs

The 'Zentrum für betriebliches Weiterbildungsmanagement' (zbw) [Centre for in-company continuing vocational training management] represents a particular synthesis of networking and training consultancy services. The purpose of this centre, which is financed by an alliance of associations from the Bavarian metalworking and electrical engineering industry, is to assist the companies within the alliance in their efforts to create sustainable human resource management. The zbw functions as a point of contact for SMEs which require information or educational advisory services. The zbw organises both public events on topics relating to competence development in all regions of the *Land* of Bavaria and as a platform

which provides information on additional contact persons. The zbw thus contributes towards the establishment of a network between the companies concerned, hereby enabling direct support for continuing vocational training in the companies. For instance, the service provided by the zbw led to an electrical company increasing its budget for continuing training after the human resources department proved the need to do so on the basis of benchmarking statistics. These statistics were obtained using a diverse range of tools, strategies and instruments which were made available in workshops to promote sustainable continuing vocational training management (for more information: www.zbw-bayern.de; www.f-bb.de).

Instruments to promote sustainable human resource practices

The previous sections outlined two strategies – training advisory services and regional networks – that help SMEs tackle the challenges of demographic change. While training advisory services compensate for the knowledge deficit relating to sustainable human resource management which is often present in SMEs, regional networks enable implementation of the planned measures. A common factor of both strategies is the way in which they both help realise integral age management in companies. For measures to have an impact, they must comprise five fields of activity (see Gottwald and Zschunke, 2008, p. 4 et seq.; Morschhäuser, Ochs, Huber, 2008). Firstly, it is necessary to implement new forms with regard to recruiting and retaining skilled personnel in order to draw upon the regional labour pool, or establish creative strategies within the network in order to deploy personnel in other jobs or companies. Secondly, preventative healthcare measures can be introduced into businesses at regional level. Thirdly, the expertise which exists within the network or can be achieved by means of training advisory services can be used to organise the work itself, the working environment or working hours in a manner that enables a healthy and productive working life up until the standard age of retirement and – where it is necessary or desired – allows workers to be active beyond this point in voluntary roles such as consultants or mentors. Fourthly, developing individual competences helps enable older workers to remain competitive in the working world: if employees participate in education processes on an ongoing basis throughout their working life, they are more

likely not only to be capable of learning in the long-term, but also to remain productive in the workplace when faced with varying working conditions (see Rump and Eilers, 2007). Regional networks can also play a supporting role in realising this lifelong education, which can also be integrated in a direct and practice-oriented manner into the working process. Since an environment which is conducive to learning is necessary to achieve this goal, the fifth required field of activity comprises a corporate and management culture that supports and promotes active ageing. Work in these five fields of activity requires a far-ranging process of raising awareness within and providing information to businesses. As demonstrated, this can be achieved using both training advisory services and regional networks. Planning and implementing the necessary strategies in the fields of activity must, however, not be viewed as a one-dimensional formula for success. It is necessary to differentiate between workplaces, employers and the regions within Europe. To ensure success, however, it is invariably necessary to plan a wide-ranging portfolio of measures tailored to the respective needs of individual businesses and implement these measures in the long-term (see Naegele and Walker, 2007, p. 37; Morschhäuser et al., 2008).

Practice has shown that training advisory services vary in terms of programmes and quality and that the emerging regional networks are in danger of petering out after a short funding period. Political efforts to support training advisory services and regional networks are important as they can help promote the employability of staff in SMEs. Developing training advisory services into a high-quality service for SMEs and supporting the regional networks in their sustainable work will be key to ensuring the competitiveness of SMEs. If these endeavours are successful, SMEs will be able to tackle the consequences of demographic change in a preventative and demand-oriented manner and look to the future with confidence.

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