

Personnel policies for older workers across the European Union: An overview

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BACKGROUND

Anywhere in the European Union, organizations try to successfully deal with the ageing of the workforce, as the proportion of older (50+) workers is unprecedentedly large. This share is expected to continue growing, both due to demographic developments and political decisions to postpone retirement age in most European countries. Personnel policies may help successfully coping with this changing workforce: for instance, studies indicate that older workers who participate in training potentially perform better (Zwick, 2015) or that older employees who use flexibility arrangements want to continue working until a higher age (Moen, Kojola, Kelly, & Karakaya, 2016). However, organizations often focus their human resource policies on their younger workers (De Vries, Gründemann, & Van Vuuren, 2001), and older employees participate less in, for instance, training, than their younger counterparts (Arulampalam, Booth, & Bryan, 2004; Carmichael & Ercolani, 2014; Taylor & Urwin, 2001). Instead, many organizations have implemented personnel policies specifically for their older personnel. Some policies aim to phase out older workers, gradually reducing their role in the organization, such as extra leave or reduced workload for older workers; other policies aim to activate older workers, strengthening their role in the organization, such as training specifically for 50+ employees or a mentoring program (Lössbroek, Lancee, Van der Lippe, & Schippers, 2017).

GOAL

Numerous studies have analyzed what factors motivate organizations to implement policies specifically for older workers, illustrating, for instance, that larger organizations are more likely to implement any kind of policy for older workers (Fleischmann, Koster, & Schippers, 2015; Lössbroek et al., 2017; Van Dalen, Henkens, & Wang, 2015). Generally, studies on personnel policies for older workers rely on data gathered in a single country (Conen, Henkens, & Schippers, 2011; Jensen & Møberg, 2012; Van Echtelt & De Voogd-Hamelink, 2017). Several projects have collected data in multiple European countries (Conen, Van Dalen, Henkens, & Schippers, 2011; Tros, 2010; Van der Lippe et al., 2016), but to date there is no comprehensive overview of the implemented personnel policies for older workers across the European Union. Therefore, this research note provides an overview of the frequency that various policies for older workers are implemented across the European Union.

Understanding which personnel policies are most frequently adopted and which are less frequently implemented can inform a multitude of actors. Researchers can use this overview to decide which policies influence the largest number of organizations, and should be most rigorously tested for their contributions to sustainably prolonging working lives. Human resource professionals can use these results as a benchmark to compare their own organizations to: what kind of alternative policies are common, is the organization a leader or laggard in HR for older workers? Policymakers wishing to incentivize the adoption of certain personnel policies can use the overview to understand which measures could be more actively stimulated and which measures are already rather common.

SURVEY COLLECTION

The author looked for academic and non-academic sources referring to the implementation of policies for older workers in one or multiple EU countries. To strike a balance between acquiring a broad overview of surveys and excluding outdated figures, the time period was restricted to data collected in the fifteen-year period between 2002 and 2017. Studies referring to older data and qualitative studies containing information about less than one hundred organizations were excluded.

In total, 20 corporate surveys were available for comparison (Conen, Henkens, et al., 2011; Conen, Van Dalen, et al., 2011; De Grip, Fouarge, & Montizaan, 2015; Eglite, Krūze, Osis, & Brants, 2014; Espenberg, Vahaste, Sammul, & Haljasm, 2012; Fleischmann et al., 2015; Göbel & Zwick, 2013; Kay, Kranzusch, & Suprinovič, 2008; Oude Mulders, Henkens, & Van Dalen, 2018; Taylor, 2006; Tros, 2010; Urbaniak, 2013; Van Dalen, Henkens, & Schippers, 2009, 2010; Van der Lippe et al., 2016; Van Echtelt & De Voogd-Hamelink, 2017; Vidovićová, 2014; Wiktorowicz & Warwas, 2017; Ybema, Geuskens, & Oude Hengel, 2009; Žnidaršič & Dimovski, 2009). For datasets with multiple waves (Conen, Henkens, et al., 2011; De Grip et al., 2015; Van Echtelt & De Voogd-Hamelink, 2017), the most recent available data were used. Jointly these surveys capture over 30,000 organizations in 22 EU countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom. As can be seen in Figure 1, the entire EU-15 is covered by this overview, but it was not possible to find applicable data for a minority of the newer member states: Croatia, Cyprus, Lithuania, Malta, Romania and Slovakia. All data about newer member states was collected after they joined the European Union.

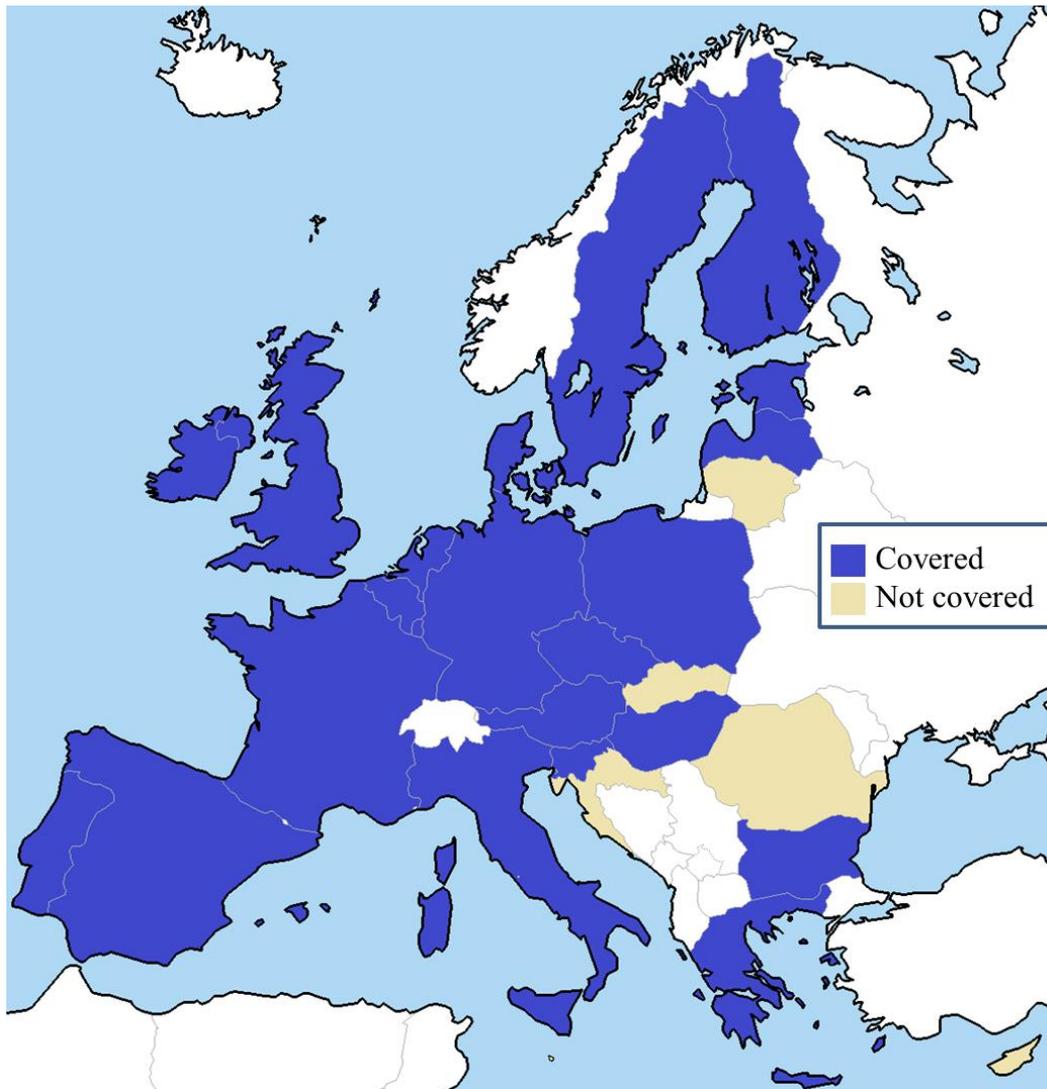


Figure 1. Geographical coverage by the studies

RESULTS

In Figure 2, an overview is given of the proportion of organizations in Europe that have implemented certain policies for older workers. Certain policies were only included in one or two corporate surveys; the average frequencies were not considered to be reliable enough for inclusion and are therefore not presented. An exception was made for the data sources that by design include eight or more countries (Conen, Van Dalen, et al., 2011; Taylor, 2006; Van der Lippe et al., 2016). Due to various complications in the harmonization of the numbers reported in the twenty studies (see the final section), it was decided that reporting (weighted

RESEARCH NOTE

or unweighted) average percentages would suggest a greater level of precision than appropriate for this case. Therefore, it was decided to cluster the policies into four brackets: policies that have been adopted in more than 40% of the organizations, policies that have been adopted in 30-40% of organizations, in 20-30% of organizations, and in less than 20% of the organizations.



Figure 2. Share of organizations implementing various personnel policies for 50+ workers

The two most frequently adopted personnel policies for older workers are a policy of mixed-age teams, and offering extra leave for older workers. In the second bracket, the policies represent a mix of phasing out policies (such as reduced working hours or part-time retirement) and activating policies (such as internal job mobility and older workers taking on a mentoring or coaching role). The most controversial policy, demotion, is understandably among the least frequently offered policies.

COMPLICATIONS IN HARMONIZATION

Several qualifications pertain to the numbers displayed in Figure 2. First, the questionnaire phrasing varied throughout the different data collections. To generate meaningful results, these were harmonized by the author. For some policies, the differences are highly unlikely to reflect different policies, such as ‘extra leave’ or ‘additional leave’. For some other policies, a higher degree of interpretation was required, and it would be recommendable to use a single harmonized phrasing across all countries. Second, the data were collected between 2002 and 2017. As personnel policies change over time, the different points in time at which the data were collected may have influenced the guesstimates. Future researchers are invited to collect data across all EU countries in the same year to improve further increase comparability. Third, in different studies, different sampling criteria were used, and in some studies the sampling strategy was not explained at all. For instance, the minimum size of the organizations to be included varied between 5 (Göbel & Zwick, 2013) and 100 (Žnidaršič & Dimovski, 2009). As larger organizations are known to offer more HR policies of any kind (Fleischmann et al., 2015; Lössbroek et al., 2017; Oude Mulders, Henkens, & Schippers, 2017), this may have influenced the frequencies.

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RESEARCH NOTE

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RESEARCH NOTE

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