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In Search of Balance: Managing the dualities of HRM

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## Training the older worker

Kathleen Vanmullem  
Public Management Institute  
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven  
Parkstraat 45 - bus 3606  
B-3000 Leuven  
Phone: +32 16 323619  
Fax: +32 16 323611  
[Kathleen.vanmullem@soc.kuleuven.be](mailto:Kathleen.vanmullem@soc.kuleuven.be)

Prof. Dr. Annie Hondeghem  
Public Management Institute  
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven  
Parkstraat 45 - bus 3606  
B-3000 Leuven  
Phone: +32 16 323607  
Fax: +32 16 323611  
[Annie.hondeghem@soc.kuleuven.be](mailto:Annie.hondeghem@soc.kuleuven.be)



## Introduction

People live longer and birth rates are decreasing. Moreover, there is a tendency for older workers to retire earlier and younger workers to enter the labour market later in life because study time is getting longer. Consequently, working life becomes considerably shorter. These trends challenge our welfare state. Fewer employed individuals support more unemployed or retired individuals. This puts great pressure on the social security provisions (such as the pension system and health care services) and on the economy. All western countries are confronted with this evolution and look for an appropriate policy. After all, the problem is partly a result of the pursued (political, economical and social) policy; and solutions are limited by the existing policy.

In order to face this challenge, it is important to urge and keep more older people on the labour market, at least until retirement age. This is a huge challenge for a country as Belgium where early retirement schemes are widely used as labour market measures. Although early retirement is less appropriate in the Belgian civil service, most public servants retire at the age of 60 instead of 65. The ageing of the society makes this policy unbearable and stimulates public and private organizations to take action.

On the macro level, governments work on new policies such as labour market programmes, national policies and measurements, retirement reforms, etc. to stimulate an active and flexible working force. On the meso level, organizations look for new organizational strategies (such as an age related personnel policy) or specific measurements (such as lifelong training and education, adapted working conditions, mobility and function adaptation) in order to maximize the employability of all competent human resources. Labour shortage forces organizations to maximize the expertise of older workers and to keep them in the organization. But also the individual (micro level) has to take his/her responsibility to stay employable and active by taking the chances the employer offers to stay 'updated' and employable. The fast changing society requires flexibility of the organisation as well as of its employees.

Several age management models already have been developed to manage age diversity. In most of these models an essential role has been put aside for lifelong learning to keep workers active and employable until retirement age. However, a big bottleneck is the low participation of older workers in lifelong learning activities (Van Groot 1999). This causes a vicious circle: older workers participate to a lesser degree than younger ones, which makes the risk of skill obsolescence for them even more acute. Skill obsolescence makes them less employable and more vulnerable to being put on the sidelines or being let out of the labour process. (Sanders e.a. 2003) The tendency of decreasing training participation during working life needs to be changed in continuous or at least more training participation of older workers. Several theoretical models describe divers factors which have direct or indirect influence on adult participation in training and education (Thijssen 1996, Hale 1990, Knowles, Holton & Swanson 1998, Baert, De Rick & Van Valckenborgh 2004). Next to the 'objective' factors, the way that older workers are perceived and imaged influences their behavior. For example: the

perception that older employees are less able and willing to learn can lead to less stimulation of and investment in training for older workers which reduces older workers' motivation to participate.

In this paper we will focus on the different forms of learning and diverse learning principles for older workers. The three research questions in this paper can be specified as follows:

- 1) What is the level of training participation among older workers compared to the general workforce?
- 2) Do older workers prefer other training methods than younger workers?
- 3) What is the importance of contextual factors in training older workers?

In order to answer these research questions we use empirical data from three sources: first we use data of an empirical research in the Flemish Government, second a survey taken in a Flemish public organization and third in-depth interviews in a variety of organizations as part of a European research project. Based on findings of these research projects, we will try to complement existing insights in adult training.

First, the existing literature is reviewed and the theoretical concepts regarding training of older workers are discussed. Second, we describe the data we use. Third, we analyse the data and we formulate our conclusions.

## **Theoretical background**

A lot of research has been written about 'adult education', but only a limited amount of research deals with learning of 'older' adults. We try to build further on existing theories to gain more insight in how to motivate older workers to participate in training. For this reason we start with some insights in age management and the importance of lifelong learning as an essential element in age management. Next we go more deeply into training participation and the conditions necessary to stimulate training participation of older workers.

### *Age management*

During the past two decades a considerable amount of literature and several models have been constructed to manage an ageing workforce. In the beginning, the focus was put on the 'older worker'; special HRM-policies were developed to keep them in an optimal employable condition and to retain knowledge and experience. This policy, called 'older worker policy', had a corrective approach. In the course of time, research and practice provide evidence that the focus has to be broadened to all age groups. Most adults spend 40 or more years in the labour market. This lifespan is associated with major cognitive and intellectual changes that influence a person's functioning (Smith and Marsiske 1994). This life-span approach, outlined by Paul B. Baltes (1997) says that development extends across the entire life course. Age-specific phenomena contribute to continuous (cumulative) and discontinuous (innovative) changes throughout life (Smith and Marsiske 1994). As a result physical,

cognitive, psychological, socio cultural, family and other changes influence a worker's working behaviour (job satisfaction, absenteeism, performance, etc).

The image of 'the older worker' is still too often dominated by stereotypes and prejudices such as "they are no longer motivated" or "they are not employable" and "they are just looking forward to retirement". Research findings, however, point out that despite some physical and cognitive decline, older workers compensate by using other resources and their experience. They are still employable (Marcoen 2006). Research shows that age is not the main reason for variance in productivity of older workers. Work experience and obsolete skills are often mentioned as other important factors (Avolio, Waldman and McDaniel 1990; Thijssen 1996; Nauta, de Bruin and Cremer 2004). Furthermore the group of older workers is, contrary to what most stereotypes insinuate, a very heterogeneous group just because of the many different life and working experiences.

Management must be aware of these age related changes and must create a work environment that recognises and accommodates the unique needs and capabilities of all workers so that they will stay active and motivated (Taylor and Walker 1998). In order to keep workers active and motivated until the end of their career, a more proactive approach was needed. This leads to the first steps of the so called 'age related personnel policy'. Research describes different HR-models and instruments to anticipate changing capabilities and needs of workers during working life. The general presumption of all these models implies that only a balance during the whole working career keeps workers employable and motivated until the end of the career. (Vanmullem and Hondeghem 2005; Leisink, Thijssen and Walter 2004; Ester, Muffels and Schippers 2003; Derijcke, Smedts, Verdijck and Wouters 1995; Kerkhoff 1993). In all these models, an essential role is put aside for lifelong learning. There is an emphasis on developing skills and competencies during working life. Although lifelong learning is a much talked-of subject, reality proves that training participation decreases with age. A number of studies show that particularly older and lower educated people are under-represented in learning activities. Less numerous are the studies that reveal factors and indicate to which extent these factors reinforce the participation level of older workers.

#### *A broad perspective on 'learning'*

Individuals learn throughout life and in different contexts. Learning does not only take place in the formal system, but also in non-formal and informal situations. Beside the conventional method of listening to a teacher, a wide variety of learning methods exist such as: learning by practising, self-learning, debating with colleagues, training on the job, internal/external training courses, company visits, networking, watching and copying, listening to those who have different experiences, etc.

However, little is known about the (preferred) learning style of older workers. Kolb (1984) states that adults develop a certain preference for a specific learning strategy, the so-called 'learning style'. Some studies about stability and change in learning styles present mixed findings (Loo 1997). If learning styles change during working life, younger and older workers have other learning styles. Where younger workers prefer to learn more theoretical and general knowledge, older workers prefer more

practical and job-orientated knowledge. Truluck and Courtenay (1999) suggest that not all older learners are active, hands-on learners as adult education literature suggests, but rather with age there is a tendency to become more reflective and observational in the learning environment. Organizations and training managers must be aware of the broad diversity of training opportunities and teaching methods, so that the most appropriate training method can be chosen in order to fit the specific needs and learning style of each individual worker.

#### *Training participation of older workers*

In literature diverse dimensions and factors that influence training participation are described and defined. Mostly a distinction is made between personal factors (motivation, schooling, learning history, career perspectives, work identity, psychological contract etc.) and contextual factors (the kind of work, function, company scale, organization culture, leadership, whether a training and education policy is strategically embedded in the organization's policy, flexible working hours and learning hours etc.) (Thijssen 1992, 1996). An important contextual factor is the 'learning climate' in the workplace, although no clear definition of this concept exists. Learning climate is the space and stimulus that workers are given in order to behave in a learning manner (Klarenberg, Van Moorsel & Poell 1996). In literature diverse important elements of a learning climate are described, such as autonomy within work processes, communication, co-operative structures, attitudes of and support by superiors, as well as time for learning, and opportunities to develop (e.g. Bergmann et al. 2000; Heintel 1992; Jenewein, Knauth & Zülch 2002; Lorscheider 1997 in: Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden 2006). Baert et al. (2004) made an effort to conceptualize 'learning climate' by defining factors concerning the learning person and factors concerning the learning activity. These are important elements to give shape to a positive learning climate. All these factors apply for 'adult learning'.

The question is if these factors are really as relevant for older as for younger workers. Based on literature Thijssen (1996) synthesized statements and guidelines in a classification of six educational conditions which must receive special attention with the increase in age of the worker. Especially for older workers with a lower education and little training experience these conditions seem to be of great importance. The six conditions are: active processing, systematic feedback, recognizable conceptual framework, direct applicability, adapted social context and an adapted logistic context. Paying attention to these conditions should help older workers to overcome the barriers to training participation.

'Experience concentration', an important concept in older workers' learning has to be taken in consideration together with these conditions. This means that, when age increases, the number of experiences will increase, while the diversity of experiences normally will decrease. Experience concentration is a phenomenon which has a bigger influence on adult learning than age. When the diversity of experiences becomes too restricted people are getting more concentrated and experienced in a certain domain. Their willingness and ability to learn something outside the domain of experience will decrease (Thijssen 1992). This underlines the importance of adapted training and education for older workers to overcome the narrowing of experiences.

## Data collection

In this paper we use data of three different research projects.

First, in 2005 we did an empirical research in the Flemish government. In this research project, we compared the theoretical framework of an age related personnel policy to the personnel policy of the Ministry of the Flemish government, which is a regional government organization in Belgium<sup>1</sup>. We used this framework to gain insight in the possibilities and needs for an age related personnel policy in the current personnel policy. On the one hand, information was collected by means of analysis of official and internal documents. On the other hand, we gained insight in the personnel policy of the organization by means of participatory observation and interviews (Vanmullem & Hondeghem 2005).

Second, we used quantitative data derived from a web survey that was conducted in 2006 in a Flemish public organization which provides assistance and advice on the well being of young children. Like most other organizations, this public organization is also confronted with an ageing workforce: 23 % of the personnel is 50 years old and over. All workers of the organization (N=1369) were asked to fill out a web survey. A total of 643 surveys were returned, which is a response rate of 47%. It was an extensive questionnaire to gain insight in what motivates the employees, how the employees experience the divers instruments of the personnel policy and what influence leadership style has on the in, through and outflow intentions of the employees (Vanmullem & Hondeghem, 2007a).

Third, we use the findings of a European research project about the training of older workers (2005-2007). The aim of the project was to stimulate reflection and discussion about 'learning, career and age' in public and private organizations. A guideline with principles about learning of workers 45+ is developed to facilitate a learning climate. This was based on 41 in-depth interviews which were taken in a variety of organizations (big and small public and private organizations). Different persons in these organizations (management, trainers, direct supervisors, workers 45+) were interviewed about what learning means in their organization, if there is a need for an older worker training policy, what learning means for workers 45+ and how workers 45+ prefer to learn.

## Analyses

The structure of our analyses is based on the three research questions.

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<sup>1</sup> At the moment of our research the ministry of the Flemish government counted approximately 13 000 civil servants; 29% of them are employed at level A (university degree or equivalent), 13% at level B (non-university higher degree), 27% at level C (secondary school degree) and 31% at level D (lower than secondary school degree); 58,5% are men and 41,5% are women. In 2005, the Ministry of the Flemish government consists of 8 departments. The largest one is the department of Environment and infrastructure. In the meantime the structure of the Flemish government has changed as a result of the BBB process.

### Participation in training

In Belgium participation rate in lifelong learning is with 10% just below the EU25 level (Eurostat 2006). A Flemish survey VRIND<sup>2</sup> (Administratie planning en statistiek 2001) gave an overview of lifelong learning participation of different age groups and educational attainment. This survey confirms that participation decreases when age increases. The survey reveals that the age group 25-34 takes most part in training and education: almost 40% followed an additional training or learning activity of at least one day during the 12 months preceding the survey. In the oldest age group (55-64 year) only 12% took part in a training or learning activity. There was also a considerable difference concerning educational attainment of the people. The Labour Force Survey (Eurostat 2006) confirms these findings and illustrates that participation decreases after the age of 34 and that higher educated people participate seven times more in lifelong learning than lower educated.

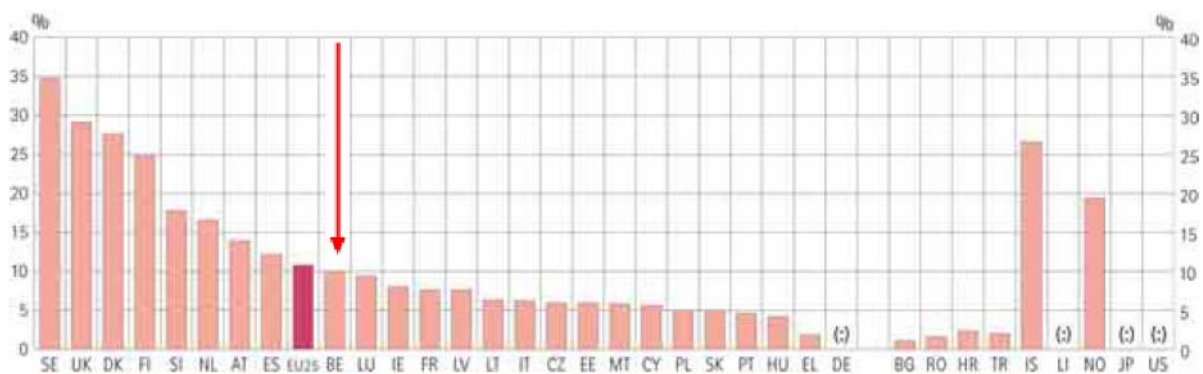


Figure 1: Percentage of population aged 25-64 participating in education and training in four weeks prior to the survey (Labour Force Survey) (Eurostat) (2006)

We examined the participation rate of different age groups in the Flemish government (Vanmullem & Hondegheem 2005). The Flemish government offers an extensive range of job-related training and education. Every civil servant has the right to take part in training and education programmes during several hours a year. We examined the participation rates in order to know who made use of this opportunity. In 2004 almost 40% of all Flemish civil servants took part in at least one training activity. A clear age related participation rate is noticeable. The younger the civil servants are, the more they participate (see figure 2). A slight difference in the beginning of the career would be acceptable because new workers need substantial training to learn their job. However the gap between the age groups is too big.

<sup>2</sup> VRIND is a yearly face to face survey of a representative sample of the Flemish population developed by 'Studiedienst Vlaamse Regering' and commissioned by the Flemish Government.

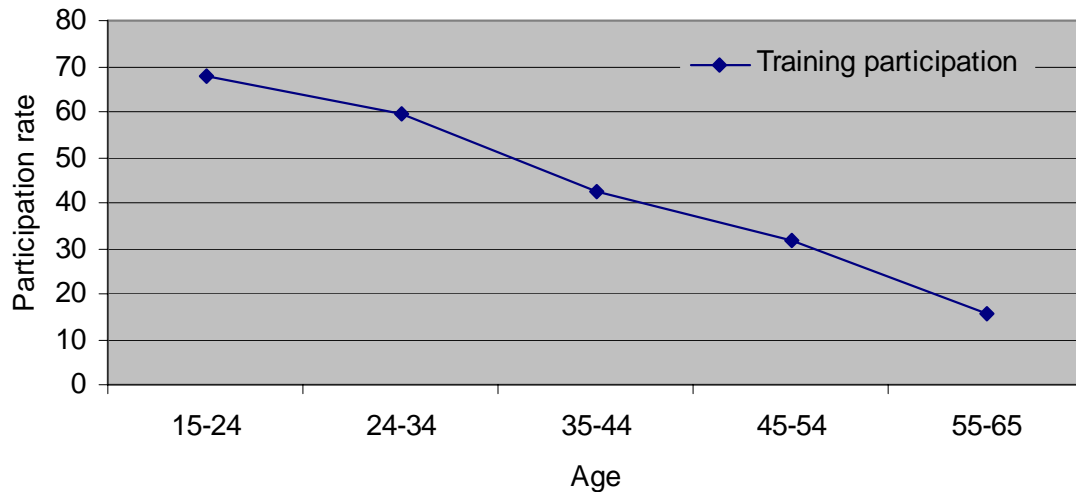


Figure 2: Participation rate in training in the Flemish government in 2004

Data also illustrate that the level of education correlates with the participation rate. The lower the education, the lower the participation rate. (see table 1)

Level	A	B	C	D
Participation rate	57,47%	56,32%	32,96%	18,50%

Table 1: Participation level Flemish Government in 2004 (Level)

It is of vital importance for the Flemish government to reverse this downward trend. The question is to what extent the training opportunities of the Flemish government meet the training needs of older workers or how does the organization communicate to older workers about training participation. In other words, is there a positive learning climate so that also older workers take part in training? The challenge for the Flemish government is not to develop more training opportunities, but to realize the fit between the training offer and the training needs of all workers. The aim is to increase the participation rate of older workers and to enhance the effectiveness of training (Vanmullem & Hondegheem 2006). The typical career path within the public service makes this even more complex: some workers attend training and learning activities because this contributes in the first place to 'promotion' in the career path (which involves a higher salary scale), not because it contributes to personal development and better performance.

*Educational conditions: Training and learning methods*

As mentioned above, different factors influence training participation. For an organization it is essential to choose the right learning method that suites the learning style. Workers learn best when training activities are consistent with their learning styles (Rosen & Jerdee 1989). For this reason we wanted to gain insight with the survey in what motivates workers, to what extent these factors differ between age groups and how leadership influences the way workers experience their job.

In one of the questions we asked the respondents (non-supervisors) how important it is to them to 'have the possibilities to learn new things' in the job. Almost one of two respondents (49,1%) answered that learning new things was 'very' important to them. Analyses revealed no significant differences between age groups. We also asked the supervisors to estimate to which extent they think learning is important for their workers. Only 7,4% of the supervisors think that 'having the possibilities to learn new things' is very important for their workers. The mean score of the supervisors on this topic is 3,61 (on a range between 1 and 5) while the mean score for the non-supervisors is 4,41 which is substantially higher. This indicates that supervisors underestimate the importance of 'learning' in the job for the employees.

In another question we asked respondents which learning method they preferred most and least. In general, learning by sharing experiences and learning on the job are mentioned as most liked, while self-study and classical learning are least preferred. There is only a slight difference in scores between the age groups. All age groups prefer learning by sharing experiences (almost 30% in each age group preferred this learning method). The youngest age group also mentioned class learning (almost 20%) as very attractive and the other age groups (31-65 years) preferred learning on the job. The older the worker, the higher the preference for learning on the job. Remarkable is the relatively high score for learning in class in the age groups '18-30' and '46-55'.

The unanimity between the age groups is higher with regard to the least preferred learning method. All age groups selected learning by self study as least preferred (43% of all respondents).

	Age group				Total
	18-30	31-45	46-55	55+	
I most prefer learning ...					
by doing	18,3	16,2	16,6	19,6	16,9
by self study	5,8	6,5	4,1	6,5	5,8
by sharing experiences	34,2	36,4	29,6	30,4	33,7
on-the-job	19,2	21,6	26,0	28,3	22,8
in class	21,7	18,2	23,7	13,0	20,0
other	0,8	1,0	0,0	2,2	0,8
Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Table 2: Results web survey: question on most preferred training method

We also examined if there is a difference between persons of different function levels<sup>3</sup>. People at the highest levels (Level A and level B) prefer learning by sharing experiences (43% and 36%), people at level C prefer training on the job (35%) and people at the lowest level (level D) prefer learning by doing (53%)<sup>4</sup>. The least preferred learning method is the same for the different groups, all function levels clearly select learning by self study as least favourite.

<sup>3</sup> Level A (university degree or equivalent), level B (non-university higher degree), level C (secondary school degree) and level D (lower than secondary school degree);

<sup>4</sup> There is a limited number of respondents of this level, which makes the respondents not representative for the whole population, but still the results give a correct tendency.

These findings indicate that also other personal factors than age, such as educational level, influence the preferred learning style. Some of these factors are closely linked to age, but can differ considerably between persons with the same age because they have another educational level, working experience, etc. The older the worker, the more attention has to be paid to the diversity in such personal factors. Because of the big difference between workers of the same age, an individual approach of learning and education for all workers is needed.

The importance of 'learning by sharing experiences' for older workers has been confirmed by results of the European research project 'Vuurtoeren45plus' (2007). The in-depth interviews with the workers 45+ revealed how important informal learning is for older workers. Many workers 45+ stated that on formal learning activities they learn most from colleagues at informal moments. Discussing work, sharing grieves and problems and hearing how others deal with similar problems/situations is very informative to them. Coffee breaks during training activities are important moments where such information is exchanged. A striking detail was that colleagues of one organization told they learn from each other but only when they go on training together, because there is no time for this in everyday work. Only when they go to training activities together they are able to talk about their job, how things go and how they deal with certain problems. A lack of possibilities to share experiences with colleagues was a frequently heard problem in the organizations.

During the in-depth interviews several points of interest about organizing formal learning activities for older workers came up. These elements were especially mentioned by workers 45+ when they were asked which factors are important to them for participating in training and education activities.

- The content and the structure of the training activity. The structure has to be clear to the organization and the participant, there has to be a good balance between theory and practice, time has to be reserved to exchange experience between the participants, to take initiatives and formulate suggestions and questions, to exercise and rehearse to make oneself familiar with new information.
- The composition of the group of participants: Smaller groups (5-10 persons) are more attractive to workers 45+ because there are more opportunities to be actively involved in the learning sessions and to ask questions. Also the composition of the group is mentioned as an important element. It is more attractive when there are participants from similar organisations. Workers 45+ prefer to learn in heterogeneous age groups. Taking part in a group where participants have similar professional experiences is more stimulating than group members with the same age. Enthusiastic reactions of colleagues coming from or going to a training activity have a positive effect on the participation intentions of less motivated colleagues.
- The trainer: according to workers 45+ an enthusiastic and successful trainer is someone who introduces himself not as the 'teacher', takes the time to get to know the people, tries to get insight in the specific background of the participants, proceeds from the students' experiences and knowledge and translates theoretical concepts to their working environment.
- Evaluation and follow up: this implies showing interest in the workers' learning needs and recognizing what workers have learned by creating the opportunities to implement and practise what

they have learned. Older workers described it as very discouraging to follow a training activity and not be able or allowed to apply what one has learned.

### *Contextual factors*

Besides some important educational conditions, contextual factors were also frequently mentioned during the in-depth interviews as motivating. The two most mentioned factors were an appropriate learning climate and the role of the supervisor.

The following elements about an appropriate learning climate are mentioned during the interviews as important:

- recognition and appreciation of the workers' working experience,
- encouragement of and possibilities for workers to exchange experiences so that they can learn from each other and get to know new learning methods,
- willingness to listen and openness to ideas, suggestions and questions of the (older) workers,
- acceptance of mistakes: an atmosphere where nobody is perfect and mistakes can happen, only practice makes perfect,
- involvement of workers in the working organization and the responsibility for their work. This gives the workers the possibilities to take initiatives and develop working systems to improve performance,
- support of management and their effort to create an atmosphere where all individuals are equal and have equal access to training and learning activities.

The role of the direct supervisor is essential in giving shape to the learning climate to keep ageing workers motivated and involved. The recognition and support of the supervisors to stimulate workers to take part in training and to stay employable is one thing. The in-depth interviews also revealed a broad variety of other possible 'roles' a supervisor can take up:

- Play a role model: walk the talk principle. Workers are not enthusiastic about training if their supervisor is negative and sceptical about the information and communication an organization provides concerning training possibilities.
- Be accessible to new ideas and suggestions or remarks: workers learn most by doing, but still they need direct and accessible support and advice when they experience a problem.
- Consult the workers: older workers have a lot of experience and are proud if people ask their advice and keep them involved.
- Use a positive approach: when older workers are less motivated to take part in training, approach them in a positive way. Start from the present capabilities of the workers, the things they are good at and suggest how they can improve themselves, instead of pointing out that they are failing.
- Announce and communicate clearly about new training and learning activities. Stimulate workers to engage themselves actively.

- Look for specific training needs on the work floor: not each problem can be solved by a training activity and not each training activity is the right answer to each problem. Supervisors need to detect the training needs correctly and be aware that workers learn in different ways.

The significance of the supervisor's role has been confirmed by further findings based on data of the web survey. We explored the impact of the leadership style on the need-deficiency<sup>5</sup> workers experience in their job (Vanmullem & Hondeghem 2007b, 2007c). Analyses revealed that the leadership style has an effect on the motivation of workers. The stronger the leadership styles of the supervisors, the smaller the imbalance workers experience<sup>6</sup>. Consequently this has a positive effect on their motivation. For this paper we examine if the leadership styles have an influence on the degree in which workers experience 'possibilities to learn in the job'. We assume, based on the essential role of leadership, that support and encouragement of the supervisor to take part in training is influenced by his/her leadership style. Based on our findings we also assume that the age and level of workers have an effect.

Regression analyses reveal that the independent variables explain 17% of the variance in 'possibilities workers experience to learn new things' (see table3). First, the relation and change oriented leadership styles are significant and have the strongest effect. Workers who experience a strong relation and/or change oriented leadership style of their supervisor, state to experience more learning possibilities. This result indicates that leadership styles have an influence on the presence of learning possibilities or at least on the awareness of these possibilities by workers. Second, the age of workers is significant. This mean that older workers are more convinced about the fact that they experience enough possibilities to learn new things than younger workers. This result is remarkable. Because we measure the perception of the worker, it is impossible to say something about the actual possibilities to learn. Are older workers expecting less and consequently they think they have enough possibilities? Or do younger workers expect much more learning possibilities than they experience? Or is there another explanation? Neither can we say whether workers grab all possibilities and learn enough to stay employable. Third, the level of the workers doesn't have a significant effect. This is the opposite of what we have found in literature. Again, we speak about 'perception' and not about the actual learning possibilities. These findings indicate that further research is necessary to understand the underlying mechanisms. In this analysis we have measured the independent variable by means of one item (as an ordinal variable). This can also explain the seemingly strange results<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> We use Vroom's (1964) 'Expectancy Theory' to measure motivation. The expectancy theory states that a worker's motivation depends on the degree to which a person wants something compared with the alternative choices and the rewards the person thinks he/she will receive. The balance between both is described as the need-deficiency'.

<sup>6</sup> For more information we refer to Vanmullem, K & Hondeghem, A. (2007c) *Leadership diversity in an ageing workforce* Paper for EGPA annual conference. Study Group III: Personnel Policies. Madrid: Spain. 19-22 September 2007. 18 p.

<sup>7</sup> We are also aware of the fact that it would have been better to use a logistic regression analysis instead of an ordinary regression analysis.

Coefficients(a)		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	B	Std. Error	
1	(Constant)	21,051	6,167		3,413	,001	
	LG_change	0,196	0,050	0,214	3,894	,000	
	LG_task	0,015	0,049	0,013	0,299	,765	
	LG_relation	0,201	0,045	0,220	4,477	,000	
	Gender	-0,210	0,098	-0,083	-2,148	,032	
	Year of birth	-0,009	0,003	-0,113	-2,991	,003	
	Level	-0,030	0,042	-0,028	-0,719	,472	
	R adjusted Square					,171	,000

a Dependent Variable: possibilities to learn new things

Table 3: Effect on the degree workers experience possibilities to learn new things

Explanation of variables: gender (1=male; 0=female); level (1= level D; 2= level C; 3=level B; 4=level A)

### Conclusion: Lifelong learning in an ageing workforce

The participation of older workers is influenced by a number of factors. A lot has already been written about adult education in literature, but less has been written about the specific needs of the older workers. With our paper we have tried to stress the factors that are mentioned by the older workers themselves as important learning (pre)conditions.

Based on our research in the Flemish government and EU-research project, we conclude that a separate training policy for older workers is not desirable. Training and education in an ageing workforce should be integrated in a age related personnel policy. This means a common positive and constructive approach towards all workers, but with space for specific emphasizes which also meet the specific needs of older workers. A separate policy would enforce stigmatizing and give the impression that 'older workers' are a specific target group which needs special attention. This would enforce their vulnerable position on the labour market which is the opposite of what we want to achieve.

To stimulate lifelong learning for all workers, a fit has to be sought between the learning style of a worker and the learning methods available. The in-depth interviews revealed that workers refer to different ways of learning: formal training activities, asking a colleague for information, discussing problems in a group or with colleagues, etc. By choosing the right learning method, the individual learning style has to be taken into consideration.

Other important factors are more related to the 'learning context', namely the support and the attitude of the direct supervisor towards training and learning activities and the learning climate. The way in which supervisors stimulate their workers to 'learn', create learning opportunities that meet the needs and communicate positively about these opportunities gives shape to a 'learning environment'. Leadership influences a worker's behaviour and consequently training participation. For this reason it is important for an organization to pay attention to these different leadership roles.

In our research an individual approach, support of the direct supervisor and communication (learning climate) seems to have an important influence on the learning participation of older workers. Specific attention for these elements makes training and education more successful for older workers.

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