

Contribution of EQUAL

Partnerships in the
occupational activation
of the 45+ group

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People aged 45+ constitute one of Poland's most marginalised groups in the labour market. The occupational activation of this group has never been a priority of Polish social policy. Special attention was paid primarily to the necessity to find employment for the young unemployed masses, whereas for older people the offer included mainly different opportunities for earlier retirement, such as bridge pension benefits, and an extensive system of disability pensions and benefits. Consequently, 2 million people joined the group of pensioners in the first half of the 1990s. Today, over two-thirds of people close to the retirement age (55+) are occupationally inactive. On average, Poles retire at the age of 56 in the case of women and 58 in the case of men, which means that the social welfare system has to support masses of young and relatively fit pensioners.

The situation on the Polish labour market is not consistent with European trends. Over the next decade, the enlarged Europe is to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustained economic growth. The growing deficit of the labour force resulting from low birth rates and the process of European societies "turning grey" may hinder achieving this objective. Consequently, the Union should focus on activating the existing resources by increasing the general employment level, the level of employment among women and people aged over 55, as well as by shifting the retirement age limit. Poland is obliged to co-participate in the implementation of these tasks, specified in detail in the Lisbon strategy.



Problems related to the occupational activation of the 45+ group – a brief description

The difficult situation of the 45+ group on the labour market could be explained by several co-related political, economic and social factors. The difficult situation of the people belonging to the analysed age group is related to the generally high unemployment level in Poland – almost twice as high as the average in the European Union. Approximately half of working-age Poles do not work (data: Eurostat, UNDP and CASE report “Working out Employment” 2004). There are no consistent employment policies regarding this group or proper activation programmes.

Another crucial reason behind this situation is the fact that people in the age group in question do not have skills attractive to employers or competences sought on the labour market, which results mainly from their low level of education. One in five people aged 45-54 only has primary education and in the 55-64 group as many as one in three. The issue of the **e-divide**, i.e. the growing technology-related generation gap, also seems very important. Older people do not know how to use digital equipment, which effectively excludes them from the labour market and increasingly often also from social life. It is also impossible to disregard the fact that the prime of their professional careers fell in the last years of the Polish People’s Republic, which resulted in the development of inappropriate work ethics: apathy, lack of initiative, taking things for granted. Such attitudes were sometimes deepened by the bitter experiences of the first years of the transformation.


The frequently unequal treatment that older people encounter on the labour market is a factor resulting in their limited occupational activeness.

The phenomenon of ageism in Poland is not only severe, but to a large extent undiagnosed. It can manifest itself in the form of harmful stereotypes regarding abilities and skills of older workers, refusal to offer employment, failing to promote older employees or send them to training courses; applying the age criterion when making decisions on dismissals in companies or automatic dismissal of employees upon their reaching retirement age.

Place of occupational activation of the 45+ group within the EQUAL Community Initiative

The EQUAL Community Initiative was established in order to test new ways of tackling discrimination and inequality experienced on the labour market by those in work and those seeking a job. The labour market changes fast, which results in the necessity to offer innovative responses to its fluctuating needs and requirements. EQUAL is the EU laboratory testing new methods in order to verify their usefulness in wider application in the social policy.

The functioning of the Initiative is based on specific principles: thematic approach, partnership, empowerment, transnationality, innovation – testing innovative and brave solutions – and integrating the achieved results into the main stream of policy to support the implementation of employment and social inclusion policies in a given country (mainstreaming). In practice, the application of the thematic approach means that states may submit the proposed initiatives in nine thematic fields whose scope corresponds **to the four pillars of the European Employment Strategy: employability** (facilitating the access to



the labour market and the return to this market for people experiencing problems in functioning on the labour market and in the society, combating racism and xenophobia in the labour market context), **entrepreneurship** (ensuring general access to instruments and tools necessary to start a business, improvement of the quality of jobs in social economy), **adaptability** (development of integrating practices in the workplace, professional development through lifelong learning, introduction of information technologies and predicting structural changes), **equal opportunities for women and men** (development of new work organisation forms aimed at ensuring family and professional life balance, limitation of division of jobs and professions into those typically held by men and women). Funds for the implementation of the Initiative have been provided by the European Social Funds and state budgets.

In Poland, the Initiative has been pursued since 2004 in five thematic fields, among which **subject F** refers to "supporting the ability of firms and employees to structural economic change and the use of information technology and other new technologies".

Partnerships focused on occupational activation of people aged 45+

Poland has 24 Partnerships implementing the initiative in the subject F. The majority of them directly focus on increasing the activeness of people over 45 years of age on the labour market. The Partnerships on the basis of which we analyse the issue of occupational activation were not selected by chance. Two criteria were of importance here: the first being the

innovativeness of activities, thanks to which new experimental methods of labour market interventions have a chance to significantly influence the structure of unemployment in Poland. The second criterion was the geographic location of the Partnerships and their beneficiaries.

The analysis focused on the five most innovative methods proposed by administrators, and Partnerships were selected in a way ensuring the highest possible diversity of beneficiaries. This report consequently concerns initiatives focusing on qualified employees from large cities as well as those directing their activities at people living in small towns and areas formerly belonging to State Agricultural Enterprises (SAEs).

They include:

- The "Let's Build it Together" Partnership (Budujmy Razem);
- "The Partnership for Chance Equalisation" (Partnerstwo Wyrównywania Szans);
- The "Alliance for Work" Partnership (Sojusz dla Pracy);
- The "Renovator – Centre for Small and Medium Enterprises" Partnership (Ośrodek 'Renowator' dla małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw);
- The "Mentoring through IT" Partnership (Mentoring poprzez IT).

Innovative methods of the Partnerships' operation

EQUAL differs from other EU funds, because it allows its entities to experiment and test solutions which are somewhat exotic from the perspective of Polish labour market institutions. Despite the limited scale of projects, some of the proposed methods might prove innovative enough to revolutionise the attitude to combating unemployment.

Job rotation

What is job rotation? The idea is based on the assumption that a modern company cannot function effectively without training. Enterprises are unwilling to send employees to professional training courses, as it may reduce production capacity. At the same time, evening or weekend courses are less effective and employees are less motivated to participate in them. Consequently, companies face a dilemma whether they should train their employees or follow production plans. Short-term rationale, i.e. focusing on the current profit, usually prevails over long-term perspective. In the longer term the company loses, because employees who do not develop their professional skills are not able to adjust to market trends. Lack of training is usually harmful for older employees, who often do not have specific skills or whose professional knowledge is outdated and consequently obsolete. If their companies are restructured, they are the first to be dismissed.

Establishing a **job bank** – a database of unemployed people with specific competences could be a solution. If an employer is going to send employees to a training course, they could use this database in order to temporarily replace the training participants. Unemployed people develop their qualifications during the training as well as the replacement employment. They will also have an opportunity to establish contacts with employers, which would enhance their chances of employment.

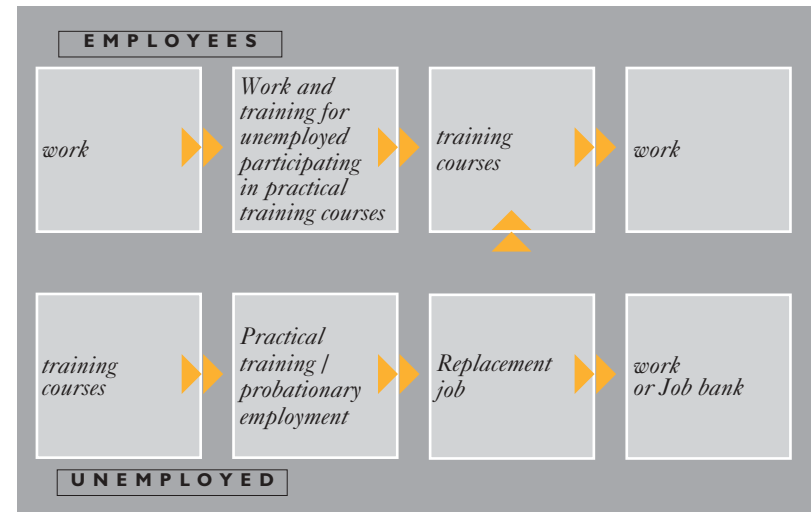
The unusual character of the job rotation programme is connected with the fact that it caters for the needs of employers, employees and the unemployed. This is a **multidimensional approach to employment**. The idea was first developed in Denmark in the late 1980s, and in 1996 36,000 people participated in job rotation projects in this country. The support of the European Social Fund and ADAPT Initiative (1995–2000) made it possible to test the project in more than ten European countries. As many as 89,000 employees, 20,000 unemployed and 3,000 companies participated in the rotation programmes. This innovative method combining support and maintenance of employment of those in work and the occupational activation of the unemployed is tested inter alia by the **"Let's Build it Together" Partnership**. The idea to establish the Partnership was pursued by the Warmia and Mazury Institute for Career Development (Warmińsko-Mazurski Zakład Doskonalenia Zawodowego) – training association with a long and rich tradition. The project leader identified the following problems in the construction market: low qualifications of employees which result in their inability to carry out construction finishing work, especially where high quality is required, prestige of the employees of the construction industry going down and the collapse of the vocational educational system.



It was assumed that a system of training services for construction and installation companies would be implemented within the Partnership and therefore industry associations were invited to co-operate: Olsztyn Construction Chamber (Olsztyńska Izba Budowlana) and Polish Association of Sanitary, Heating, Gas and Air-Conditioning Technologies (Polska Korporacja Techniki Sanitarnej, Grzewczej, Gazowej i Klimatyzacji). The project partners focused on identifying training needs of construction and installation companies. A survey was carried out among the employers in order to estimate the demand for individual types of training. Companies proved to be interested first of all in all new formulas of preparation of employees to the job. Introducing the job rotation system initially encountered certain resistance on the part of the employers, but obvious benefits encouraged them to participate in the programme. "This was a total innovation in Poland. Initially, employers did not want to accept this method – not before some time did they understand that they would get a verified employee, with experience at their company and additionally trained for EU money".

Candidates for replacement employees were sought among the unemployed from the former SAEs areas. As many as 80 people participated in the personal skill and motivational training course including occupational safety and health issues. One of the five training groups, being prepared for international rotation, also participated in the basic French course, which was then continued using Internet remote learning method. A group of 74 people participated in vocational training courses for construction work technologists, electrical fitters and plasterers. After the training, the unemployed were introduced to the job rotation system and replaced regular employees from 90 small and medium enterprises, which enabled these employees to participate

in vocational training courses. As many as 90 people were trained in new technologies, while 52 interested people – participated in computer courses. A group of 462 people gained new specialised skills during training courses, which significantly enhanced their value to employers.



Job rotation model



Jobcoaches

Jobcoaching is an innovative form of career counselling, developed and applied in the Netherlands. It is aimed at supporting the introduction of the unemployed to the labour market and retaining people at risk of unemployment on the labour market. Jobcoaching is based on the assumption that the growing psychological distance to the labour market resulting from lack of motivation and belief in one's own capabilities constitutes one of the crucial risks for such people. Due to that reason, individualised approach to a beneficiary is of key importance in the jobcoaching methodology.

The role of the coach requires higher activeness than that of a traditional professional advisor. The coach's task is to help a given person in finding a place on the labour market and identifying a career path, which involves analysing the position of this person with regard to education, skills or professional status, but also their motivation level, family situation and interpersonal skills. Based on this information, the coach together with the beneficiary develops **an individual development plan**, which sets the method of achieving professional objectives, including e.g. training courses, methods of competence development, retraining or looking for a job. This is not the end of the coach's task. He/She is also responsible for supporting the client in seeking a job, providing guidelines and supervising the client's activities. A direct relationship, which naturally develops between the coach and the client, supports effective identification and solution of issues. Notably, the implementation of the coach's tasks may take as long as several years.

The Alliance for Work Partnership, co-ordinated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), undertook to test the jobcoaching

method in Poland. The Partnership decided to test the effectiveness of education in equal age groups, involving one beneficiary working with another. Consequently, candidates for coaches were identified among final beneficiaries, namely in the health care sector, light industry and non-governmental organisations, as well as in the target group of people aged over 45 years. It was also assumed that the people selected should have good communication skills, be able to accept and express criticism, solve conflicts, carry out negotiations and demonstrate administrative and organisational skills. The candidates were also required to have experience related to the labour market (e.g. gained when seeking a job). Ultimately, 45 people were trained. They participated in psychological courses, including inter alia self-assessment and communication exercises, as well as in vocational training courses. For some participants these courses were an opportunity to enter a new profession and after completing them they were employed in their current workplaces as job coaches.

Training courses for final beneficiaries were designed in such way as to include psychological and social, as well as purely professional problems of people participating in the project. Obligatory psychological courses included interpersonal communication, time management and objective focus, as well as change motivation, co-operation, collaboration and assertive behaviours, which was to support elimination of **acquired ineptitude**, namely the situation when attitudes and behaviours developed some time in the past hinder effective fulfilment of professional duties. The programme offered a range of voluntary vocational and specialised training courses preparing for the work as summer camp carer or manager of youth summer holiday centres, quality system specialist or quality system internal auditor, make-up artist, manicurist, beauty specialist or catering service technician. It also offered a possibility to

gain some knowledge of accounting principles using computerised techniques as well as conditions of running business activities in Poland and European Union countries. Computer training courses were obligatory for all participants, while nurses had a chance to participate in specialised courses e.g. regarding palliative care basics or palliative therapy.

Fast response method

The fast response method focuses on preventing unemployment at source, as it is based on the assumption that "no job exists without a company". Many small and medium enterprises which experience serious problems decide to "restructure" their operation by reducing employment. Older employees are the first to be dismissed, not only because of their age, but mainly due to their obsolete professional knowledge and lack of IT skills. Their chances to find a new job are limited. The fast response method attempts to prevent liquidation of workplaces by increasing effectiveness and competitiveness of enterprises.

This approach is especially useful in regions of high unemployment, such as the Warmia and Mazury province. The unemployment ratio reaches 24% and recently almost 1/5 of companies were liquidated there. "Jobs are at existing companies and at companies which are able to develop." Therefore the "**Partnership for Chance Equalisation**" associating many social partners led by Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" – Warmia and Mazury Region (NSZZ Solidarność Regionu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego), focuses "not

only on the unemployed, but also on companies in order to ensure that people do not lose their jobs. Companies should not dismiss employees, but retain them on the market; restructuring should not be associated with dismissals".

The first step in the implementation of the Partnership programme was establishing **Emergency Response Teams** in five selected districts (powiaty). Competitiveness Support Groups providing support to employers and Friendly Assistance Groups supporting employees started to operate as a part of these Teams. The latter ensure support, provide information on courses and the available assistance, as well as organise workshops, consultation meetings and specialised meetings with psychologists and professional counsellors. Beata Abramska, the Partnership co-ordinator said: "You cannot help an employee without supporting the management, because the company would not survive anyway. This is what EQUAL taught us – support must be provided concurrently". Composition of teams is highly differentiated: for instance, at Pisz the team includes local entrepreneurs, representatives of the office of district starosty authorities as well as employees from the district labour office and training units. Teams learn to build communication and define principles of role allocation, and then start to look for companies which need a support in their region.

The next stage of the activity is **diagnosis**. Management and finance experts analyse the company, owners and employees in order to identify the source of problems. Whenever necessary, a financial analysis is carried out, with the aim of supporting the preparation of the company development plan.

Subsequently an **individual support path** for the enterprise is defined. The last stage involves an **intervention**, i.e. implementing specific preventive activities with the participation of official labour market institutions. Employees

of the company are sent to soft skills or vocational training courses adjusted to the abilities and needs of the company, financed e.g. from resources of the labour office. The training programme is designed in such way as to increase the mobility of employees and their effective retraining. It includes construction, welding, operating machines and equipment, craft and handicraft, catering, retail trade, tourism and hotel services, as well as other more specialised areas, such as finance, management, marketing and advertising or management techniques. Members of the management also participate in training courses aimed at the development of new skills in the area of state-of-the-art management of enterprises as well as methods of obtaining EU funds. Training courses ensuring the development of a dialogue between employers and employees are also carried out. If the situation of a company does not allow it to retain a group of employees, activities aimed at preparing the people being dismissed to re-enter the labour market are implemented. The programme involved the participation of employees from 17 companies.

The Partnership pursued yet another interesting initiative – **business cafés**. Entrepreneurs from small and medium enterprises often have practical experience, but lack theoretical knowledge of business principles. According to Professor Ryszard Walczak from the Tadeusz Kotarbiński University of Information Technology and Management in Olsztyn (Olsztyńska Wyższa Szkoła Informatyki i Zarządzania im. prof. Tadeusza Kotarbińskiego), "they are good specialists, but they operate intuitively. For instance, they have difficulties in understanding that increasing a scale of operations is not always desirable, because a dramatic growth in costs would limit profits". Conditions in which entrepreneurs have to operate now are completely different from those of the 1990s, when the majority of small enterprises entered the

market. Attempts to introduce advanced restructuring programmes to entrepreneurs were unsuccessful and thus, a decision to simplify the process of specialised knowledge transfer was made. "Cafés" are to be an unofficial forum where entrepreneurs would have an opportunity to talk to management, finance or marketing experts in an informal and more casual atmosphere, which will help eliminate the distrust barrier. These meetings have their leitmotiv, e.g. budget preparation or decision making in an enterprise. The objective was also to show that companies can benefit from contacts with local research units. Consequently "it will be the employer who will start to notice their own shortcomings. As a result, the knowledge and tools provided to the owner would strengthen them and show the activity strategy ensuring that the company would not stop operating and people would be able to keep their jobs".

Competency renovation method

The competency renovation method involves introducing new jobs present in well-developed economies to the Polish labour market. This is aimed at increasing the effectiveness of activities and consequently the competitiveness of small and medium enterprises, which are the target group of the partnership. This objective is achieved in a way ensuring a simultaneous increase in the attractiveness of employees, who due to their age or life situation are exposed to the risk of unemployment resulting from the restructuring of their enterprises.

These assumptions are implemented based on two closely interrelated activities. The first activity includes employee training, which enables them to get a new profession in the area of e-learning or develop vocational skills in the area of modern management support. The second activity includes training of employers, who learn how to employ Innovative Information Technologies in order to increase the competitive advantage of the company. As yet new technologies and related jobs do not function on our market and for that reason examples of countries highly developed in terms of IT are followed. One of the co-ordinators said: "We observe the development of trends in the most competitive economies (...) and right now Sweden belongs to the top, after having recovered from the 2000 crash (...) and achieving the status of the most advanced countries in the area of information technology over several years. We also monitor the US and Australian markets, and we simply know that we have lagged way behind with regard to this development. If some skills and jobs develop there as a result of the market demand, the solution is easy to identify. We cannot analyse our market and identify the recommended development direction, as our market is not developed enough to allow for such identification".

According to the administrator, the reason of this situation is the fact that management at small and medium enterprises is not sufficiently "advanced in information technology" to understand questions related to new technologies. The project is based on the assumption that our economy would develop in the same direction as leading world economies, i.e. towards the data analysis or e-learning. Therefore such solutions started to be promoted among employers together with providing training for employees.

During "IT Meetings", employers develop their knowledge of state-of-the-art information technologies and their applications in practice. They also

analyse economic calculations as well as specific solutions and products. First successes were achieved: without any doubts they include significant interest in the profession of media teaching and learning specialist responsible for supporting remote learning groups and the co-operation with a remote client. The demand for this specialisation exceeded the training capacities of the Partnership.

The training programme for employees is very demanding, because they must gain basic computer skills first and then learn specific information technologies. The course ends with an examination and the next stage of the programme includes a traineeship in the Institute of Mathematical Machines or one of the partners – the Systems Research Institute, which teaches the participants to use modern management support and remote learning methods. During the traineeship beneficiaries become members of work teams, in which "they fulfil normal duties", and after completing the traineeship they have average expert skills. Then they are admitted to the two-stage certification examination, which verifies the knowledge gained during the "renovation" process. Examinations are recorded and are subject to detailed verification, which is aimed at ensuring top quality of activities implemented.

Redirecting the Polish economy to innovative information technologies, which supports competitiveness growth, is a measurable benefit resulting from the project.

Mentoring through IT

Computerisation of the inter-generation competence transfer involves improving the process of knowledge transfer between young people just starting their professional career and employees over 50 years of age. This task is crucial, because when hiring a young staff member employers often dismiss one of their older employees. This, however, results in considerable losses, because the dismissal of the older employee closes the access to all their knowledge and experience. At the same time, the most common reason why older people are discriminated against on the labour market is their inability to use new information technologies, which are present in practically every part of our lives. Due to that reason, older employees often fear that after transferring their skills to younger colleagues they would become obsolete, and consequently colleagues working in the same enterprises are not willing to share their knowledge.

The "Mentoring through IT" method developed by the Partnership is aimed at eliminating barriers in the inter-generation knowledge transfer by using computer software. Thanks to using the Internet, costs of the whole project may be seriously limited as well as most of the difficulties it may face, and the geographical diversity of the process can be considerably increased. For example two employees working in geographically remote units of the same corporate network share their knowledge, thanks to which the human capital of the whole enterprise is developed. This process runs in two directions: young employees teach the older ones basic competences related to new technologies, necessary to effectively perform their work in a given

sector, while they themselves obtain the knowledge gained over the decades of the professional experience which employees over 50 years may offer.

How is it possible that individual knowledge, elusive as it is, can be effectively transferred through **inter-generation Internet links**? This is because the partners participating in the project are carefully selected and professionally recruited with regard to their psychological characteristics. In spite of appearances, the method whose effective functioning seemingly requires the participation of a large team of psychologists, is not very expensive. This is because employee pairs are matched based on their personal characteristics (obviously after completing appropriate questionnaires and coding their results in the programme) by an IT tool developed by the Partnership. It includes four basic modules.

The first one – recruitment – is responsible for pair matching, which significantly increases the participants' chances of effective co-operation during the implementation of tasks in subsequent modules.

The second module – educational – is responsible for the initial stage of the information exchange. Its purpose is to enable young employees to transfer the knowledge regarding the application of state-of-the-art technologies in the workplace.

Roles are reversed after the completion of this stage. Within the third module – mentoring – employees from the 50+ group, proud of their newly-acquired IT skills, start to transfer their knowledge resulting from their professional experience. The knowledge transfer may take various forms, from written instructions to multimedia presentations involving vision and sound.

Interestingly, older employees began to "open up" and start the knowledge transfer as early as during the process of information transfer from the younger

project participants, thanks to the fact that the tools developed do not limit the whole process to one company, often exposed to internal rivalry. Both modules – educational and mentoring – are in practice simultaneous, which will probably extend the scope of the knowledge transferred and increase the pace of the transfer during the whole project.

The last module is aimed at evaluating effects of the whole project. The tool was developed by the Electronic Computation Technique Centre in Olsztyn (Zakład Elektronicznej Techniki Obliczeniowej w Olsztynie) in co-operation with entrepreneurs in order to ensure that the end product is fully consistent with their expectations. Efforts were also made to ensure that the whole solution was visually attractive while maintaining its maximum functionality.

Employers should be interested in implementing similar solutions, because the knowledge gathered in such way is not lost, but constitutes a permanent asset of the company after the cooperation ends, thanks to which it may be transferred to other employees. This leads to the general increase in professional skills in the enterprise and consequently improves its competitiveness on the market. People from both age groups participating in the project also enjoy several benefits. Their value on the labour market significantly grows, as obtaining new IT skills delays the moment when older employees leave the company, whereas specialised industry knowledge obtained by young employees helps them start their professional career.

Final beneficiaries

For the majority of institutions participating in the EQUAL project, this Initiative became an opportunity to implement plans developed for a long period. They recognised the issue of occupational deactivation of people aged 40+ as a significant gap in the social policy system. As mentioned by the co-ordinator of the "Alliance for Work", with the single exception of the 50+ project, such programmes had not existed before.

Some Partnerships further specified their groups of beneficiaries, endeavouring to reach people exposed to the relatively highest risk on the local labour market. For instance the "Let's Build it Together" Partnership and "The Partnership for Chance Equalisation" focused on the construction sector, while the "Alliance for Work" is directed at the health care sector, light industry and non-governmental organisations.

Renovator – Centre for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

The purpose of the "Renovator" Partnership is to improve the adaptability and competitiveness of employees in small and medium enterprises, which plan to undergo restructuring processes or implement outplacement projects. Apart from women on childcare leaves or those who have just ended those leaves, the target group includes people aged over 45. Training courses offered by the Partnership enable these people to

45+

become more competitive on the labour market, so they do not have to fear losing their jobs during the process of the enterprise restructuring or being replaced by younger people. "If an older person and a 20-year-old can use Word, the 20-year-old would be obviously hired because of the market trend. However, if the older person has rare and unique skills, nobody would look at their age".

According to the project co-ordinator, the 45+ group "is not a good material for training courses on Innovative Information Technologies (IIT)." She emphasised that fact that no one was interested in offering new qualifications to 30 year-olds ("let them learn on their own"). In her opinion, work with older people is more difficult and "slightly different". "These people have inhibitions, grudges, they are not appreciated, their behaviours can be different. They are not people of success: easygoing, open, cheerful (...), without doubts they have more difficulty learning and they lag behind. Additionally, if the information culture is low, their training is much more problematic. At the same time, we have considerable satisfaction, because we really endeavour to verify their knowledge reliably before issuing the certificate".

It should be noted that partners experienced difficulties in reaching the target group. Final beneficiaries were recruited by two partners: the Polish Chamber of Commerce (KIG) and the Women Online (Kobiety Online) portal. KIG usually looks for employees who are interested in the participation in training courses through employers associated at local chambers of commerce, first of all via electronic mail. However, this is not the best method of recruitment, as KIG communicates only with local chambers of commerce, while it does not have a full database of enterprises associated at these chambers. Another issue is related to information blockage on the enterprise

level. Employers, whose contact details KIG obtains from its local units, do not always transfer the information on training courses to their employees. The aforementioned method was supplemented by direct contacts with employers during conferences and meetings organised by KIG. During such conferences and meetings short presentations regarding the Partnership are held, and information leaflets encouraging employees and employers to the co-operation are handed out. Final beneficiaries are also recruited through press advertisements.

The total number of people to be trained includes 250 people employed at small and medium enterprises and 100 managers. As many as 100 people from the first group have been already trained, out of whom 20 obtained certificates. Interestingly, the majority of people expressing their interest in participating in the project are women – this refers to the group of employees aged 45+ as well as employers. This situation was not predicted by the project administrator. Its reasons might include better education of women and the fact that men endeavour to maintain their high self-esteem at any price, due to which they find it difficult to admit defeat ask for assistance.

Mentoring through IT

Beneficiaries of the "Mentoring through IT" Partnership include two groups particularly underprivileged on the labour market: employees aged 50+ and young people at the beginning of their professional career. They exchange their knowledge, which significantly improves their competitiveness on the labour market.

As the structure of the participation in the project is somewhat complex, the recruitment process was carried out with the application of different methods for both age groups. Young people were recruited during the job fair organised by AIESEC in Olsztyn. This resulted in a database including several hundred people, out of whom 75 candidates were selected for the next recruitment stage. Criteria applied during the selection of candidates included their education and IT competences necessary for the correct implementation of the educational module.

Candidates to the second age group were selected in a different way: recruitment was based on press advertisements and direct contacts with entrepreneurs, which was the responsibility of Warmia and Mazury Association of Private Employers from Olsztyn (Warmińsko-Mazurski Związek Pracodawców Prywatnych z Olsztyna). The number of participants finally selected from the database was 75, and the main criteria included their professional knowledge and experience which could be shared during the mentoring module.

People selected from both groups underwent psychological tests, carried out by the Research and Training Institute (Instytut Badawczo-Szkoleniowy). Results obtained were input to the recruitment module and 15 pairs of co-workers were matched. These people were invited to a training course aimed at establishing personal relationships between the partners and developing the necessary IT competences by employees aged 50+, enabling them to use the tool provided by the Partnership at the subsequent stages. Pairs were matched in such way that beneficiaries did not have an opportunity to meet face to face, which made it possible to verify the functioning of the tool in a situation when partners are geographically remote and can only communicate using the software provided. This is a very important

consideration, because it often determines the effectiveness of the tool if the co-operation is transferred to the international level. Two people aged 50+ from Slovakia will soon join the project.

Let's Build it Together Partnership

The "Let's Build Together" Partnership was focused on employees from construction and installation companies, "recognised as not economically worthy of investment invest by their employers".

The Partnership included in its project the occupational activation of long-term unemployed from the former SAEs. Employees of the Warmia and Mazury Institute for Career Development (Warmińsko-Mazurski Zakład Doskonalenia Zawodowego) responsible for the project co-ordination were aware of how enormous their tasks were thanks to their previous experience in the work with the unemployed, but the scale of the problem proved to be shocking. Despite a series of motivating and psychological training including 100 hour sessions, it was impossible to modify the "freebooter" attitude prevailing among the majority of the participants or teach them basic work ethics principles. It was difficult to even induce the unemployed to regularly wake up in the morning or accustom them to the 8-hour working day. According to the co-ordinator: "Working with the unemployed from the former SAEs was a desperate task. During the project they had everything: clothes, travels, lunches; in accordance with the commitment principle, we adjusted to their needs. However, the more they were spoiled, the worse

they behaved: they got their pocket money – they bought beer instead of going to the construction site”. Incidents of vandalizing hotels occurred in the course of the training programmes. Partners emphasised that “it is difficult to help these people – their decline in morality is so significant”. Not all participants completed the training courses; several people were expelled due to repeating bad behaviour, and the significant majority did not accept employment offers after completing the courses.

“It is 100 years rather than 100 hours of motivation training” that we need to restore the social capital the former SAEs regions. Also due to that reason, the Partnership designed its activation activities in several dimensions. Based on the assumption that unemployment affects not only the unemployed themselves, but also to their whole families, the project also included the activation of women related to the unemployed”. Women proved to be very interested and willing to co-operate – it was obvious that they would like to develop.” Additionally, it was soon concluded that some of the women who signed up for the programme were connected with “the most difficult” men, previously expelled for repeating bad behaviour. The Partnership plans to invite these men to the next stage of the programme in order to check “whether influencing the wives and teaching them how to motivate” is effective.

Alliance for Work

The “Alliance for Work” (Sojusz dla Pracy) Partnership focused on activating people aged 45+ living in the Łódź region, endangered by unemployment, who do work, but are objectively exposed to the risk of unemployment. The project activities included the health care sector, light industry and non-governmental organisations in the Łódź province. Special attention was placed first of all on women as the group particularly discriminated against. Leszek Michno from the PINEL Foundation explained the reasons of their involvement in the activities aimed at improving the situation of this group of employees: “You should talk to a secondary school graduate, with a limited education, working as a nurse in the same place for 25 years. A new nurse comes, a university graduate, using a PC, speaking a foreign language. It is impossible to work without some computer skills knowledge at a hospital now; all data are recorded in the PC. A 50-year-old feels threatened, she is afraid of losing her job and thinks that she would not be able to come back to this market, because no one would employ a person who has worked as a nurse for 25 years on another position. Talking to these people is a sufficient justification of taking care of them. If you strengthen their resources, computer skills, but also their self-esteem, they change their approach to their position in the workplace. A young person coming to work ceases to be their competitor, because they have professional experience, they are better and are not afraid to lose this job. It makes sense”!

The Partnership supported its activating activities by the survey carried out in May 2006, aimed at identifying the difficulties experienced by people aged

45+ on the labour market. The total number of respondents was 182, and 75% of them were participants of the "Alliance for Work" project, mainly women. They indicated e.g. the need to be retrained, they were pessimistic about their chances to find a job and expressed fear of losing the current job. Results of the survey helped to achieve a better understanding of this group's needs and adjust the preventive activities accordingly.

EQUAL Partnerships as labour market institutions

Activities of the EQUAL Partnerships on the labour market have two dimensions. At the direct level, they adjust the beneficiaries to the requirements of employers and improve their chances for finding a job. At the indirect level, they influence the shape of the labour market by creating new jobs, needs, expectations and attitudes of the participants, adding new segments to this market and extending the tools available to combat unemployment.

"The Partnership for Chance Equalisation" attempts to implement the idea of broad local partnership as an important element of the labour market. It includes organisations and institutions which have not co-operated until now: employer organisations, trade unions, local associations, local authorities, labour market institutions, as well as universities and training companies. A network of entities operating on the multidimensional labour market was thus created. The key concept involves shifting the focus from alleviating unemployment consequences to preventing unemployment. Special emphasise is placed on the support for entrepreneurs, as companies' continuing to

operate would be beneficial for all interested parties. As one of the project founders said, the Partnership should be "integrally integrating".

The "Alliance for Work" Partnership has also combined the activities of different institutions. The "Alliance" for people at risk of losing the job or discriminated against on the labour market was established by trade unions, employers, women's organisations, non-governmental organisations (including organisations focused on non-occupational activation), training companies, university units (specialising in women and labour law research) as well as Members of the Parliament from the Łódź province. Such a wide group of organisations and institutions is to increase the effectiveness of activities and consequently it becomes possible to implement steps leading to changes in the discriminating attitudes among employers or to encourage trade unions to undertake innovative initiatives. The co-operation with official labour market institution is smooth, although – which was mentioned by partners – labour offices sometimes treat the Partnership as a competitor. Official labour market bodies apply proven methods and operate in a standard fashion, often preferring quantity over quality. Job counsellors are responsible for 30-40 people, while professional advisors at labour offices look after 2 to 5 thousand people. The job coach dedicates a few dozen hours a year to a client, while the state professional advisor – 20 minutes.

The job rotation system tested by the "Let's Build it Together" Partnership leads to the development of a new labour market segment – temporary (replacement) job reserves. The Job Bank at the Olsztyn Construction Chamber (Olsztyńska Izba Budowlana) was established as a result of the programme. Every employer may request data from the OIB. Rotation projects result in the "win-win-win" situation, because all the parties participating in the project benefit from the co-operation: the unemployed, employees and entrepreneurs.

The "Renovator" Partnership implements tasks typical for the labour market institutions, i.e. it helps its beneficiaries find jobs. The "Renovator" training centre prepares employees who – after obtaining the certificate – become experts sought on the market. However, its functioning is not limited only to this basic level, because at the same time the **Partnerships is becoming an institution influencing the labour market**. By introducing new jobs to the Polish labour environment it operates on the rule setting level. The highly innovative activity seems a major value added of this Partnership, which does not focus on treating the symptoms of the "unemployment disease", but endeavours to understand its nature and identify an effective vaccination. This might be the reason why the activities of this Partnership are not met with understanding on the part of state labour services, which influences the quality of mutual relationships.

The "Mentoring through IT" Partnership has developed a tool which might become an independent labour market institution, influencing its dynamics. It should be noted that in the face of the aging population the possibility to organise smooth "inter-generation exchange of knowledge" becomes an important criterion both for maintaining the employment of older employees and for the competitiveness of companies.

Problems of pioneers

What were the major difficulties encountered by the EQUAL Partnerships in the implementation of the objectives related to occupational activation of the 45+ group? These problems were

mainly related to specific features of the support recipients. Lack of work ethics, resulting from the previous system of the centrally controlled economy and hard transformation period, constituted the major barrier. The impact of the social policy, preserving apathy and dependence on public aid, also proved significant. This was most clearly visible in activities of the "Let's Build it Together" Partnership.

The majority of the Partnerships described here tried to help small and medium enterprises. However, the management of these enterprises proved to be relatively conservative and often deprived of the basic knowledge of economics and management, which hindered the provision of the technologically advanced support to this group of beneficiaries. Additionally, SMEs are inflexible with respect to implementing new forms of developing human resources with problems in sending full time employees, who cannot be easily replaced, to training courses.

The insufficient level of computerisation of the Polish society in the broad sense is another issue. Some of the aforementioned Partnerships employ state-of-the-art information technologies in their activities, whose the implementation was hindered by lack of competences and understanding, which was difficult to eliminate. For instance, the co-ordinators had to train some of the co-operating institutions to use electronic mail or fax.

It should be emphasised that **the majority of the aforementioned difficulties are similar to the problems which are to be addressed by the solutions developed by the Partnerships**.

Conclusion

From the perspective of the labour market policy, innovations tested by the Partnerships seem insufficiently effective. Activities of the Partnership reach a relatively limited group of beneficiaries, which is often criticised by labour offices. However, this weakness seems to be the major advantage of the Initiative. This is because in accordance with the logics of their functioning, Partnerships were to test solutions which had not been applied on the Polish market rather than operate as typical labour market institutions. On the one hand, their lower effectiveness allows for individual approach in each case, and thus creating unemployment combating methods almost perfectly adjusted to the needs of beneficiaries. On the other hand, Partnerships operating on a limited scale can take much higher risks than state employment services, because if a programme ended in a fiasco, the measurable losses to the labour market would be relatively low. However, job rotation, jobcoaching, fast response, competency renovation and inter-generation knowledge transfer methods described above do seem successful. An attempt should be made to adapt these solutions to the needs of state labour market institutions, which would constitute a chance to radically change the attitude to the issue of unemployment.

Reference materials:

- In-depth interviews with project co-ordinators and partners
- Websites of Partnerships
- Materials delivered by Partnerships and National Support Structure
- Materials delivered by the Academy for the Development of Philanthropy in Poland



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