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Donald Ropes

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Addressing the challenges of an ageing workforce: an intergenerational learning toolkit

Donald Ropes



Donald Ropes is Associate Professor at the Centre for Research in Intellectual Capital, Inholland University of Applied Sciences, Haarlem, The Netherlands.

Introduction

European demographics point towards increasing numbers of older workers (55+) due to an overall ageing of the population, the raising of legal retirement age and a decline in birth rates. If predictions hold true, this trend will continue until about 2060. While older workers do not necessarily mean problems for organizations, an increase in their numbers does bring with it several challenges – especially in the coming years while organizations adjust to the demographic changes.

The purpose of this article is twofold: to discuss some of the challenges organizations face in regards to an ageing workforce that I discovered in my research and to present the results of an European Union (EU) project called SILVER (see www.intergenerationallearning.eu) that was developed to help knowledge-intensive organizations deal with older personnel in a positive and effective manner by organizing intergenerational learning (IGL). Project partners included researchers in the field of human resource development (HRD) who worked in universities from Finland, Germany, Greece, The Netherlands, Romania and the United Kingdom.

Methods

As part of the project SILVER development, I interviewed 32 HR managers in the six EU countries of the project partners and from varying sectors – both private and public – on the topic of ageing personnel. My interview protocol was based on a previous literature study on ageing in organizations (Ropes, 2011). Data were analysed by categorizing it using a combination of emergent themes and present ones that came from my literature study. I also collected data using a quantitative marketing survey. This too was based on my previous research, including specific work on intergenerational learning in organizations (Ropes, 2013). Eleven hundred and forty-seven mid and top-level Dutch managers responded to 45 questions that asked about their organization's policies concerning workers older than 55 years[1]. Respondents were from both the public and private sector and worked in medium or middle-large sized organizations (250 or 500 employees, respectively). They represented both strategic and operational levels in various departments such as human resources, finance, control, public relations and operations. Data were analysed

using statistical software SPSS 15. Below, I discuss some of my findings along with their implications.

Challenge number one: stimulating older worker learning

Employee development and learning is a critical success factor for organizations, helping them to adapt and innovate in a changing environment (Tynjala, 2008). However, from various studies, I know that personnel above the age of 55 typically do not take part in formal learning and development at work (see, for example, Beck, 2012; European Commission, 2007). My own survey confirms this. Only 71 of the 1,147 (6 per cent) managers polled reported having any kind of training and development as a policy for dealing with workers 55+.

As the number of older workers grows, organizations will need to learn to stimulate development and learning among this group, or risk losing competitive advantage. From the interviews, I found that stimulating learning was the biggest concern HR managers have regarding older workers, as employee learning is crucial for organizational success in rapidly changing environments. Survey results are closely linked to this. I found that managers are most worried that older workers negatively influence the ability of the organization to change. Seventy per cent of managers from the public sector and 58 per cent from the private sector indicated that the ability to change is in fact the greatest challenge. This was followed by organizational flexibility (53 per cent in both sectors).

Challenge number two: disturbed social processes

Challenge number two concerns generational strife and the consequences it can have on the organization. As older worker cohorts grow, HR managers expected instances of ageism (negative stereotyping) to increase. Underlying social processes can play a large role in the success of an organization for various reasons, not the least regarding learning and knowledge transfer among employees. In the survey, 63 per cent of the managers named the structure of personnel make-up as the second largest problem a growing cohort of ageing workers will bring with it.

Challenge number three: waste of valuable human resources

Challenge number three was related to a waste of human resources. HR managers were keenly aware that many older workers' knowledge and capabilities were not being used to their fullest in the sense that their organization fails to capitalize on the diversity between the generations. Interestingly enough, when asked about current policies aimed at dealing with older workers, almost no replies were related to this perspective, but rather focused on reducing the stress of older workers in ways such as job size reduction, alternative tasks or partial pension. The survey results underpinned these findings: 57 per cent of the respondents listed these factors as methods for dealing with older employees.

The IGL toolkit: helping organizations to meet the challenges of an older workforce

The main goal of project SILVER was to come to a tested set of tools that management could implement to deal with some of the challenges sketched out above. During my preliminary desk research and discussions with experts in the field of organizational learning, knowledge management, HR management and HR development, I came to the idea of the IGL (Intergenerational Learning) Toolkit.

Developing the toolkit

There were of course design parameters. First, the tools needed to address the challenges I came across in the developmental stage of my research. Second was flexibility. Trainers

or HRD managers needed to be able to implement the tools in different contexts without major “retooling”. It was important to have tools that were recognizable to management, so they could readily understand implementation within their own organizational context. Finally, developers needed to assure that the tools stimulated informal learning, which is more appealing to older workers, as it is collaborative, problem-based and situated in the workplace (Wognum and Horstink, 2010).

Getting management buy-in and support is the first crucial step in any organizational intervention. The tool I developed for this is a series of workshops and employee surveys that I called the Stakeholder Awareness Program, or *STAP*. The tools in the *STAP* were designed to:

- diagnose the problems in the organization related to ageing workers;
- identify the potential benefits of IGL for their organization; and
- assess potential barriers to IGL.

As part of the *STAP*, I also developed the *GIGL* (Gaming for IGL), which is a serious web-based game intended to give a simple introduction to IGL.

Once management awareness is built, the next step is to organize IGL using the *DIGL*, or “Doing IGL”. This section of the toolkit promotes informal learning with the specific goal to:

- increase older workers’ employability through developing key competences, such as learning to learn, learning to innovate and learning to build knowledge collaboratively with different generations;
- contribute to younger workers’ learning and development;
- help embed sustainable innovation in organizations;
- assure critical organizational knowledge retention and reuse; and
- provide a way for cost-effective training to older and younger employees.

More general goals were implicit in the design. These were related to improving intergroup contact (i.e. social capital, communication).

Table I below shows the elements of the DIGL and the approximate level of time investment needed for both participants and trainers.

Table I Elements of the IGL toolkit: goals and investment needed			
<i>Type of IGL</i>	<i>Tool description</i>	<i>Main goals of tool</i>	<i>Level of time investment</i>
(Reverse) mentoring	Various instruments that help set up, guide and evaluate a (reverse) mentoring program	Improved competence; knowledge retention	Moderate: two employees are engaged for a minimum of 16 hours each over a period of several months. External facilitation (trainer) +/- 4 hours in total
Intergenerational teams	Instruments for a team-building trajectory	Knowledge creation; capitalization of diversity	High: a whole team is engaged for a minimum of 10 hours over a period of at least 4 months. External facilitation (trainer) +/- 30 hours per group in total
Intergenerational trainings and workshops	Various independent workshops	Build social capital; Knowledge exchange	Low: a whole team is engaged between 4 and 8 hours. External facilitation (trainer) +/- 16-24 hours in total
Intergenerational Knowledge capturing	A methodology for codifying implicit knowledge	Knowledge loss prevention	Low to moderate: two employees are engaged for 12 hours each over a period of 3 to 4 months. External facilitation (trainer) +/- 18 hours in total

Testing the toolkit: process and outcome evaluation

I tested the toolkit in 43 different knowledge-intensive organizations located in the six different partner countries. Most testing took place from November 2012 to November 2013, and I am still doing some, especially intergenerational teams. The *STAP* was the most tested, followed by one-day workshops found in the *DIGL*. Some of my results from the evaluation are that HRD managers were positive about the toolkit because:

- of its flexibility and ease of use;
- its modular design;
- it mirrors typical organizational activities; and
- it is readily available and free of charge.

There were some criticisms of the toolkit, mostly that it was somewhat unwieldy – there were too many documents that overlapped, that the evaluation forms were too generic and that results of some of the interventions (especially the quantitative survey found as one tool in the *STAP*) demanded technical skills associated with statistical software, which most of the managers and trainers I tested with did not have. Furthermore, according to the evaluations, the Intergenerational Knowledge Capturing tool was overly complicated in its design and demands facilitators well acquainted with theory on metaphors.

Specific outcomes related to IGL were difficult to measure in such a short time frame but I did find that the toolkit built awareness effectively among both management and employees. From responses on my evaluation forms, I also found some improvement in teamwork, including raised levels of social capital and team efficacy.

Concluding remarks

The IGL toolkit is not in itself revolutionary, yet its flexibility is a new dimension. In this way, it seems to fill a gap in this way, as well as addressing the issue of ageing workers. The toolkit is a valuable contribution to my understanding of how older workers can be facilitated in their learning and development and at the same time be used to help organizations to deal with ageing employees in a positive manner. This is the practical relevance. Officially the project has ended, but has spurred new research in the field of informal learning and learning motivation of older workers.

NB. All reports on the development, testing and all the tools (in Dutch, English, Finnish German, Greek and Romanian) are free to download from www.intergenerationallearning.eu

Keywords:

Ageing workers,
Organization development,
Work based learning,
Intergenerational learning

Note

1. The results of a similar study done in Greece, Spain, the United Kingdom and The Netherlands closely mirror my own (See *Van Dalen et al., 2009*).

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Corresponding author

Donald Ropes can be contacted at: donald.ropes@inholland.nl

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