

Mid-life Skills Review Project: International Report

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Project summary

The **Mid-Life Skills Review Project** aimed to develop a digitally supported **mid-life skills review** that could help prepare workers to be more resistant to the labour market challenges they might face in the future.

The background to the Mid-life Skills Review project was summarised in the project proposal as follows:

A substantial body of evidence exists that shows people over the age of 50 in Europe exiting the labour market find it more difficult to re-enter. We will develop a digitally-enabled mid-life skills review that can help prepare workers to be more resilient to labour market challenges they face in the future. This can be an important preventative measure in helping mid-life and older workers remain in the labour market by supporting them to update their skills and progress in their current workplace or to make a career change.

The objectives were to train peer reviewers and to explore digital badging as a way to accredit the work done by reviewers. A digital platform would provide one support mechanism for reviews and hold the results of a review for the participant.

To support the moves for Europe-wide Mid-life Skills Reviews in a positive way, the Mid-life Skills Review project planned to develop new, freely available materials to be used to train reviewers/assessors who carry out Skills Reviews and new online assessment materials to support their work.

Each project partner researched and produced national level contextual reports on the state of play in each country about mid-life skills reviews and made suggestions about what, on the basis of their findings, we then needed to do. Some aspects of these national reports were brought together into this international report, which was originally created to inform the Mid-life Skills Review project, and is now produced here to inform stakeholders about the background to the concept of Skills Reviews at mid-life across the partnership.

Aims of this report

Emerging from individual country reports, created by each partner during the initial phase of the project, some additional aims were identified to add to the work of the Mid-life Skills Review project and to the concept of Mid-life Skills Reviews.

We needed to ensure that the project could be used to demonstrate sufficient evidence that would help us in:

- Clarifying to policy makers and others that this is an issue which deserved our and their concern;
- Identifying and meeting the needs of people in mid-life;

- Situating mid-life skills review in a continuum of later life learning - which included planning for later life and retirement education;
- Situating mid-life skills review within the workplace and workplace learning;
- Situating mid-life skills review within a critical approach to the delivery of career development education.

Common themes

The following themes were identified in the individual country reports. These were the themes that the project had to focus on:

- The role of social partners - especially Trades Unions - what are they doing and what can they do?
- Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) - what is the potential role for volunteers (i.e. non-professional) in delivering mid-life reviews?
- The role of employers and HR professionals in delivering mid-life reviews.
- The role of careers services, employment services, education services and other agencies in mid-life reviews.
- How can we disseminate the Mid-life Skills Review' approach to mid-life skills reviews among a wide group of stakeholders? As well as trades unions and other social partners, there are national/regional ministries, public employment services and a whole range of others to include.
- The role of training in retention and in enabling access to new jobs.

Gaps

A number of gaps were identified from the separate country reports. The most frequently identified which best informed the rest of the project were:

Low-skilled adults

It was unclear in most countries what the particular implications of the mid-life approach would be for the most low-skilled adults. This area would need further work during the project and was one of its key aims. However, we were able to make some assumptions, based on evidence from previous activity, about issues affecting low-skilled adults in mid-life in the labour market as being particularly vulnerable to precarious employment and uncertainty along with labour market discrimination.

Poverty in older age

We needed to decide if we should be more focused on poverty in older age. Our discussions focused on whether the aims were more about keeping people in work, enabling people to make changes in their lives, enabling people to live life to the full, maintaining health and well-being in later life or were they just about reviews and increasing skills without examining the wider benefits or implications of such reviews. We agreed that we should not lose focus on either aim.

Aspirations of older people and workplace rights

Our proposal stated:

‘There is no lack of aspiration among working people but a lack of intensive, experienced support to motivate and encourage them (Eurofound 2017).’

However, people’s aspirations are not the only factor in supporting workers during mid-life; there are disincentives to stay in work, and older people may face labour market discrimination. There is still a tendency to try to encourage older people out of the workforce - though this may be reducing slightly, and in some sectors there is active encouragement of people to remain in their current employment. This led to the question being posed: Did the project have a role in highlighting labour market discrimination?

The role of employers

In most countries across the EU the focus remains on young people, because of the ongoing high levels of youth unemployment. However, in the UK in particular and increasingly in other countries, some employers are now taking action to retain their older workforce, as they have seen the long-forecast change in demography which means they need these older workers. Retention is a major incentive for employers to become involved. As a project we needed to raise awareness of the importance of addressing the needs of mid-life employees. Therefore, we decided that we should be carrying out awareness-raising amongst employers and producing tools for pro-active dissemination.

The [skills] reviewers

In order to produce sustainable products and outcomes we needed to be clear about who the ‘reviewers’ were in the project context. What skills are needed to be a reviewer? To what extent should professionals be involved? How can we train reviewers?

Recommendations

In the individual country reports, the recommendations for the project were divided into three sections:

1. Materials and actions to support reviewers
2. Materials and activities to support older workers/learners - which includes information advice, guidance and/or career guidance
3. Responding to skills needs

It was recognised that the project would not be able to address all these needs. The recommendations are listed here in a summarised version, usually without further explanation.

1. Materials and actions to support reviewers

Preparing for review

- Organisational analysis tools: e.g. to find out what extent older workers participate in continuous training (general, per activity, per occupation)
- Understanding local labour market information

Training the reviewers

- Requires the development of new training modules for union representatives and others.
- Open access materials would be useful in this context.
- Training and materials for continuous professional development for careers advisers exist - to what extent can these be shared?
- Make use of existing materials for the overlapping areas of coaching and mentoring.
- There are sufficient (often rather expensive) courses at a range of levels right up to Masters and beyond in careers advice and coaching. More lower cost provision is needed.
- Develop further open access training modules for potential reviewers.

Conducting the review

- Guides and tools for diagnosis / needs assessment
- Tools for the review process
- Tools for helping people to consider career paths outside the current company (see also onward referral)
- Open access materials aimed at workers to support the review.

The potential role of HR and line managers

- Using professional ‘interviews’ to inform employees about the option of using careers counselling services - professional / management sessions should offer wider opportunities than just review of current work.

(This relates to both conducting the review and onward referral. But, note the difficulties of using the management process for this kind of mid-life conversation too, as intentions can be mis-interpreted by employees.)

Topics beyond work and skills

- During the review, other subjects than skills would doubtless be discussed with individuals (housing, health, family, addiction, finance, caring, etc.). These issues also need toolkits and onward referral.

Onward referral (also known as ‘signposting’):

- Reviewers need to have a broad view of the other stakeholders in employment and social fields who they could ask for help with specific issues
- Reviewers should be equipped with good knowledge of which are the other organisations, systems or professionals who they can turn to
- Careers advisers
- People who understand local labour market information.

The importance of partnerships

- It is critical to develop alliances - both to train the reviewers and to provide the onward referral pathways.

2. Materials and activities to support older workers/learners

Partners suggested the kinds of tools, exercises and processes to which it would be good to have access. Some of these appear contradictory - for example, some partners suggested that workers would prefer to work face to face in a classroom setting and others that distance learning via the internet is preferable. Another example was whether older people prefer to learn intergenerationally or with other older people. This reflected research in the field of lifelong learning, which has shown contrasting findings and served to remind us that we needed to know our learners and design appropriate training for their needs, interests and requirements and that there was unlikely to be a one-size fits all model. Employers, trainers and social partners needed to work together with employees to determine what is best in their context. The following examples were suggested:

- One partner suggested that it would be useful to have specific training for older workers:
 - content - ICTs
 - methods - via e-learning
 - methods - participative and experientially based
- In the UK, there was a database of mid-life career review materials and linked web resources, which is now out of date. It may be possible to gain access to and even re-work and re-publish some of these materials, which may belong to the original partners in a mid-life career review project but have also been placed in the public domain.
- Making sure people have easier access to dynamic management tools (training license, managing late career stages) for workers aged over 45.
- Tools for supporting people when facing loss of jobs/redundancies - and preventing long term unemployment.
- Training materials to support older workers staying in or re-gaining employment
- Information, advice, guidance which orients towards training options as well as jobs etc.
- Promote training for older workers - for retention as well as changing jobs
- Promote training which older workers prefer - small groups, well-paced learning, classroom based and perhaps amongst other older people
- Straightforward materials to explain and reach directly to people to explain issues which face people in mid-life
- Online materials should be designed to be very clear, not taking anything for granted, i.e. how to reach different web pages / sources, how to access the documents, how to subscribe, etc.
- Materials which underline in different ways the advantages that could come from joining the project and sharing the approach providing incentives that encourage the target group to get involved, both at psychological and social level (e.g. trying new things, meeting new people, etc.)

3. Responding to skills needs

We grouped these recommendations into several types: skills needs of individuals; organisational issues with skills gaps/training provision; and, inequality in access to training. Recommendations from partners are listed below:

Skills needs of individuals - societal and individual

- The extent to which skills are associated with transformation in an occupational sector, obsolescence of jobs or skills
- Perceptions from the company or person at the end of their career as they reach a certain age.
- Skills diagnosis tools are needed to support people to take up training.
- Skills needs can vary so methodologies for gaining skills are more important than skills needs.

Organisational/company responses to skills gaps/training provision

- Support for organisations to analyse to what extent older workers participate in continuous training (general, per activity, per occupation).
- Support for organisations to analyse skills needs in general and specifically those of older workers.
- Links to formal qualifications - for example - sectoral where there are sectoral skills shortages; participation in career counselling and non-formal forms of further learning may be used as a starting point for further learning involving formal qualifications. Ensure qualifications/certification is offered if appropriate.
- Develop training offers from a skills appraisal as part of the employment process.
- Specialised support units within the active employment policies, that include an offer of specific public services for guidance, training, re-qualification and inclusion for people aged over 50.
- Awareness-raising, public sector actions - with participation from social partners and other social organisations.
- Organised skills and competences sharing at workplace, within working communities and networks maximises the benefit of the skills and competences that aged employees have achieved through their career.

Inequalities - the impact on participation in training

- Older employees attend training and education less than younger generations. Little evidence of early retirement due to outdated skills and knowledge. Yet, while pension ages have increased, in some sectors actual retirement age has decreased, and we could aim to increase the training participation rate to encourage people to stay in the workplace for longer.
- Some people rejoin the labour market after a few years as they find that early retirement does not work well for them.
- Support for older employees at workplaces is dependent on the employer.

- Training at work is dependent on socio-economic status. A societal level gap and societal inequality.
- Retirement plans are linked with labour market status, with higher status work / more pay associated with better pensions and potentially earlier retirement as it can be afforded. Training should be divided more equally.
- Onward referral, after mid-life review, to education and training remains problematic. There are few options for re-training which are cost-free. If people can afford to take part in education or training, or if their employer is willing to re-train them, then the options increase. The recommendation should therefore include the availability of appropriate re-training for people in the workforce who are over 50. This might be more available in some countries than others.

Transfer Recommendations

In addition to the recommendations above, the individual partners highlighted recommendations for the transfer of knowledge and understanding. These are listed verbatim below.

Transfer recommendations - Basque Country

- No cases had been found where all the recommendations had been implemented from the age-management guide for organisations in the Basque Country. However, its proposals seemed interesting and transferable for the itinerary to develop age-management in organisations. This itinerary is as follows:
- Diagnosis: analyse the concept of age in organisations and the feasibility of implementing management measures in this field: analysis by structure, area, activity and specific job (professional promotion, experience, sick leave, etc.).
- Improve senior workers' access: from non-age discriminatory recruiting processes to more advanced notions centred on diversifying the age of staff (contracting older people by placing value on them encourages development of specific products or services, better knowledge of customers, experience and they provide stability to workforces with very high rotation).
- Maintenance: actions focus on optimising senior workers' potential, targeting two main questions.
- Promotion and professional development: development of skills, promoting qualifications and access to training.
- Guaranteeing that all workers have access to a career review helps them to either continue their development or start a new career path, keeping in mind the company's needs and the workers' interests and motivation.

- Knowledge transfer by developing knowledge maps and mentoring help to predict the importance of a loss in intellectual capital derived from older workers leaving, as well as drawing up strategies that make it easier to transfer knowledge to new workers, to help them learn the job, etc.
- Health and safety in the workplace: ergonomics and active prevention and adaptation of functions and working conditions, avoiding potential damage to health due to undertaking heavy-duty or risky tasks.
- Departure: This focuses on the processes for workers' departure/replacement, favouring relief contracts and similar or cutting back or adding flexibility to working hours. It will also tackle specific situations where jobs need to be maintained in restructuring processes.

Transfer Recommendations - Germany

- Challenges arising from the institutional framework for career counselling and competence advancement
- Challenges arising from the focus of societal discourses
- Challenges arising from the attitudes of employers towards competence advancement of their employees
- Challenges arising from the discontinuity of programmes and networks in the field of career counselling and competence advancement

Transfer recommendations – Finland

The following steps should be taken at Nordic level in order to prolong the working careers of older employees:

- Learning should be enabled in a work environment
- Adult teachers should fully understand the needs of older employees and be able to support them accordingly, thus training for trainers is required
- Social partners should contribute in building a diverse learning environment
- Older employees should be more active in finding and suggesting support
- Everyone should provide the media with good examples and contribute to the over-generational discussion
- The Nordic Council should support the national governments to build better structures to enable lifelong learning for all

Transfer recommendations - France

The Individual Training Leave (ITL) is primarily intended for low-skilled employees.

The ITL is still a powerful driver of change, especially for occupations (70%) and responsibilities (65%). The ITL enables 69% of the beneficiaries to exercise a function in connection with the training they have followed, a result that is maintained over time.

ITL actively participates in employment policies. It achieves the objectives set for it: professional mobility, employability, social mobility, business creation and takeover. The financial and personal investment it represents must be considered over a career path. This is by definition a device geared toward employees with a need for qualification, once in their career. The ITL can be considered as a second chance tool towards qualification, securing career paths and sustainable opening to employment.

Individual Training Account (ITA). - Evaluation

There is a strong mobilisation of national networks around Career Counselling (CC):

- to define or reposition their entire service offer for the implementation of the CC and continue to reposition it with changes in the CC and the implementation of structuring partnerships between them.
- to take advantage of their complementarities, especially for those who are both training funders and career development advisers (Pole Emploi, Opacif)
- to evolve their organisations so that the work of the referent of course is optimised
- as an employer, to develop the skills and professionalize their "advisers", and to ensure coherence with shared tools (COMCEP) and service offerings and expertise of other networks.

Some progress had to be made in order to complete the implementation of the ITA:

- The opening of new digital services associated to help building a project, the awareness of existing rights and opportunities, and the opening to new uses (skills assessment, creation and takeover of a company), the bonus for employees less qualified, the opening to new categories of public (public agents, self-employed workers, consular agents).
- The strengthening of the autonomy of the holder, in accordance with the spirit of the law of 5th March 2014
- The development of “skills blocks” related to the evolution of certifications and their integration in the ITA
- The optimization of access to lists and access in search of the training offer.

Next to advisors who work in public operators or job agencies that organize all public devices we have presented above in the report, addressing youth, job seekers or workers in any companies, some “guidance counsellor” work in large organisation proposing their services to workers of their own organization.

HR departments of large organisations have the function of “guidance counsellor”.

What is the status of these careers counsellors or peer reviewers? It could be difficult to match workers expectations in terms of pathways development and the firms situation and policy. In our case, focusing on senior workers, only very large firms could have enough people with concerns to create such an occupation. Could it be done by social partners at a sectorial level? By public services? Stakeholders' position, strength, history and national context had to be taken into account.

Transfer recommendations - Italy

We have not found any practical cases at national level where all the recommendations have been implemented from the age-management guide for organisations in the Italian territory.

The practices identified were really specific and difficult to transfer, and this is a further reason of the importance of our project which should create transferable processes and tools.

We could be inspired by some analysis done, by the best practice reviews in this field or the description of the context changes due especially to the laws about pension and labour reforms.

The phase of comparing the situation in the different countries belonging to the project consortium will be fruitful, possibly also to detect some practices suitable also for the Italian case.

Transfer recommendations – UK

Exchange between partners some of the values and principles behind these approaches, as they are rooted in equality and diversity practice, and a belief in fair access to good employment and educational opportunities.

How people can deliver/can be trained to deliver mid-life reviews of various kinds. Particularly we have focused on training people who are in the workplace and who are not necessarily experts in human resources or careers advice.

Annexes - The separate country reports

This report including annexes can be found on the unionlearn website
<https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/mid-life-skills-review-project>