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Managing Employees of Various Ages as an Aspect of Diversity Management: ILSS Research

Effective human resource management that is to ultimately bring tangible business results is tied with the need to define the set of instruments serving the building of engagement. This article presents the results of surveys into the opinions and expectations of employees by age groups as well as studies of employers in terms of diversity management, especially age management.* The analysis is intended to identify effective factors in the building of engagement in the context of age diversity.

Key words: age management, diversity management, motivating, engagement.

Introduction

Diversity in economic organizations is the subject of increasingly broad interest among management circles. Gender, ethnic origin, age, job seniority, life and professional experience, education, competency, and political conviction diversity may be a significant impediment to the efficient management of human resources. However, when actions are taken that are aimed at managing such diversity, especially when a diversity management strategy is developed and implanted, it becomes a way to improve the effectiveness of action and improve efficiency as well as the

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company image, its innovativeness, and its competitiveness (Jamka, 2011; Sznajder, 2013; Forum ..., 2013).

One of the most important premises in this field is the seeing of differences in the qualities of employees of various generations. Differences in ways of acting, effectiveness, learning skills, and in perceiving matters of importance to the company, including the expectations of employees belonging to different age groups, are subject to study, identification, and description. It is this perspective that is becoming increasingly important due to the fact that about twenty years ago the world noted a tendency of aging of the population (including Eurostat and GUS data, 2014). Significant attention is being paid to this matter in the context of accessibility of labor resources as well as their quality and efficiency. In the United States and Europe, including Poland, this question is becoming one of the most important social and economic problems. Analyses have been conducted in Poland for the past ten years and their results popularized. Many research reports and scientific works devoted to this subject—matter (including Turek, 2013; Kryńska and Szukalski, 2013) have been published. Specialists are trying to send a clear warning signal regarding the threats stemming from changes in the breakdown of population ages where the tendency is a growing population of older people. In the work environment, the balance of generations to date is being shaken and employers are faced with managing an increasingly old staff.

In as much as that it is significantly less frequent for Polish organizations to practice diversity management in a comprehensive way than their Western counterparts, the limiting of diversity to the perspective of employee age is much more common. What is known as “age management,” understood as age diversity management (see Kołodziejczyk, 2014, p. 37), is becoming an increasingly universal phenomenon as it is becoming vital due to the worsening perspective of generation replacement and difficulties in guaranteeing staff succession. What is more, the already noticeable changes in age structure in worker teams are no small challenge for employers and managerial staff. Developing management paths and instruments requires reviews and an adapting to the changing qualities of human teams. In order to achieve high efficiency it is very important to monitor employee attitudes and sensitivity to motivational instruments in terms of age diversity. Literature provides such analyses rather abundantly (including Kołodziejczyk–Olczak, 2014; Kopertyńska and Kmiotek, 2014; Gadomska–Lila, 2015; Urbaniak, 2011). If these are developed to include employee expectations with respect to employers, then it will be possible to define potentially effective factors building engagement in various employee groups. However, the final decisions of managers in the question of shaping engagement should

take into account many perspectives simultaneously—age, sex, education, etc.—because reactions to stimuli vary in the case of each one of them (compare with Wziątek–Staśko, 2012, pp. 104–145). That is why building truly effective engagement systems is extremely difficult. Topical literature by foreign authors (including M. Armstrong, 2010, pp. 153–163) as well Polish ones (including Borkowska, 2010; Juchnowicz; 2012; Kołodziejczyk–Olczak, 2014) strives to convince us many times over of its impact on organization efficiency and innovativeness.

This being the case, the undertaking by the Institute of Labor and Social Studies (ILSS) of research into the shaping of employee engagement in the context of diversity management must be considered important. The goal of the project is the defining of the most effective methods and tools for building engagement in various employee groups.

This article presents a segment of the results of ILSS research into the expectations of employees of various ages as well as effective factors for building engagement in a team that is diverse in terms of age.

Research Method

The discussed research project has been underway since 2012. It was planned as a multistage study that is to be concluded in 2016. The research process that is the basis for this project consists of studies of topical literature as well as quantitative and qualitative empirical research. The quantitative and qualitative research has been carried out on 104 medium and large companies and institutions belonging to “knowledge-intensive” industries. The research encompassed both employers and the employees of these organizations. The research into the employers was conducted in the form of 104 individual in-depth interviews (IDI) with the heads of HRM departments (or with organization heads if there were no such department), analysis of documents, and a panel of experts whose goal was to enrich possible interpretations of the research results derived within the framework of the project. The basis for employee research made up the quantitative section. It involved the conducting of a questionnaire (PAPI) with 2,045 workers in a manner guaranteeing participation in the survey by people of various age, sex, job positions (managerial, specialist, line), and working on the basis of various employment forms (full-time and part-time employment contract, tele-work, civil law agreements, etc.).

The goal of this stage of the project was the verification of data acquired from personnel department heads with respect to the opinions of the employees of those organizations as well as the acquiring of information regarding the needs and expectations of various groups of employees.

Employee research was conducted by way of two focus group interviews that made possible the identification of the preferences and opinions of the selected employee groups regarding methods and tools for building their engagement in work and in the company. A panel of experts, with the participation of employers, was the capstone of the research work.

Intergenerational Differences

The ILSS study subdivided surveyed employees into four age groups—up to 35 years of age, 36–45, 46–55, and 56 and over. It turned out that the representatives of these groups have many opinions and expectations in common, but they also have many differences.

Table No. 1. Engagement Building Factors Recognized by Employees as Being Most Important by Age Group (%)

No.	Most important factor	Up to 35	36–45	46–55	Over 56	Total
1.	Employment stability and security	35.6	41.0	39.5	46.6	39.5
2.	High remuneration and financial awards	20.5	20.6	18.4	9.0	19.9
3.	Attractive non–wage benefits	9.7	11.2	11.1	6.7	10.3
4.	Continuous professional development	7.5	6.1	6.4	2.8	6.3

Source: Own study on the basis of ILSS research.

Those taking part in the survey were presented with a list of eleven potential engagement building factors identified during the focus meetings as being important (Jawor–Joniewicz, 2014). It turned out that employment stability and security were the most popular and most important to almost 40% of surveyed employees when given a choice from a closed list of what are known as “first choice” factors. Thus, the building of engagement by way of indefinite time employment contracts cannot be overrated. However, the feelings of the respondents did differ depending on age. The most sensitive to this aspect were the oldest people, the over 56 year of age group. Almost half of them valued employment stability the most. The ranking of this factor does not fall in direct proportion to age, however (see Table No. 1). It is still above average in the 36–45 age group, while for the youngest workers it is in first place the least often. The second factor in terms of indication frequency as being the most important is the financial factor. High remuneration, bonuses, and

raises were a basic expectation with respect to employers of 19% of those surveyed. However, its weight varies significantly depending on age. Older workers treated it as a priority over twice as rarely as others (see Table No. 1). This can be explained by the fact that upon achieving certain stability in life it is natural for expenses to be lower in this period of life (the purchase of a dwelling unit, its furnishing, and the maintenance of children are expenses usually incurred during earlier periods of life). In as much as 20% of the younger people considered financial matters to be of prime importance, only 9% of the oldest group identified with such views. Attractive non-wage benefits (e.g., medical care, mobile phones, and laptops) were in first place for one out of every ten people, where this was the most attractive for the middle-aged and the least important for the oldest (see Table No. 1) among those surveyed. The fourth factor—continuous professional development—was indicated by only just over 6% of those indicating it as being the most important, but these were usually young people and very rarely were they among the oldest. Thus, there is no reason for concern that older people feel limited in their access to development programs. They are simply not particularly interested in them and this is not a factor decreasing their engagement.

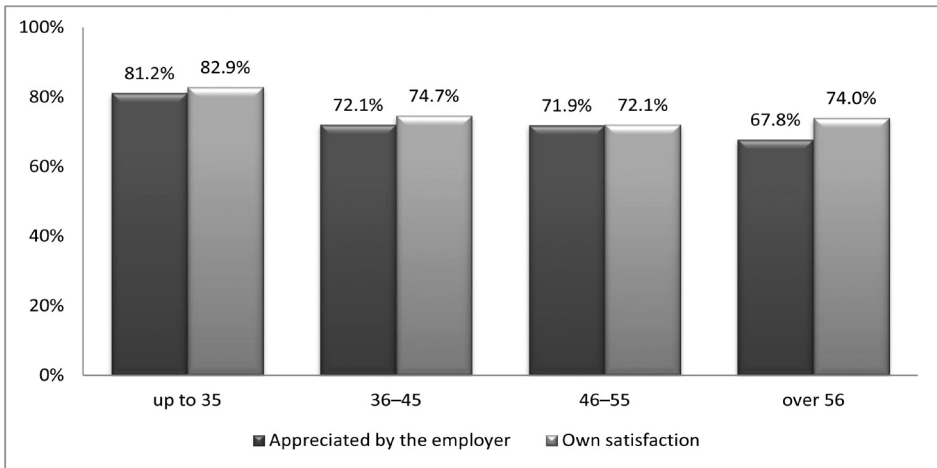
Those taking the survey usually stressed that they like their work (75%). Differences among age groups were not large although it was workers in the 36–45 age category who seem the most satisfied while the oldest were the least.

In characterizing the studied population in terms of different generations, worth stressing is the high and unchanging with age level of engagement in work in the assessment of the interested parties themselves. About 70% of the workers expressed their high engagement and even 75% indicated that they like to be strongly engaged in their tasks when they have a feeling that the employer appreciates that. This is underscored the most clearly by the youngest employees, while the oldest are somewhat more indifferent with respect to assessments by superiors. Self-satisfaction is much more important to the oldest. The remaining groups of workers want to be engaged in well-performed tasks for their own satisfaction. This is depicted in Figure No. 1.

In order to better understand diverse worker teams, the ILSS questionnaire asked what would be a source of particularly strong motivation to perform tasks at work even better. The responses were analyzed in terms of visible differences. A long list of motivational instruments were arranged in line with their ranking as derived from the opinions of workers. The list was opened with high basic remuneration (over 78% confirmed that this is a motivational factor) and financial awards (75%). Good atmosphere was deemed decidedly stimulating (77%), as was the equal

treatment of all employees in the workplace without any discrimination of any category of worker (76%). Good communication in the company also acts positively (77% of recommendations). Characteristic in this case is that among these most important of motivational instruments for all employees, there was no significant difference related to age.

Figure No. 1. Share of “I like to be engaged in my task if I feel the employer will appreciate that” declarations and the share of “I like to perform my task well for my own satisfaction” declarations by age group.



Source: Own study on the basis of ILSS research.

However, there is a whole gamut of motivational means that are “sensitive” to the age category of the addressee. The effectiveness of influence on the focus group will be dependent on the right choice of stimuli. Efficient management of workers of various ages requires familiarity with these mechanisms and their constant monitoring. Table No. 2 presents examples of instruments that will not have the same effect on all employees.

A detailed analysis of the empirical material, inclusive of the results of the focus interviews, allow the statement that apart from high remuneration, stable employment contracts, and good interpersonal relations that strongly influence everybody, it is possible to define the expectations of various groups of employees and assess their sensitivity to ways of motivating and building engagement.

For the youngest workers (up to 35 years of age), contacts with the superior and that superior’s appreciation, a sense of community and good communications

within the team, transparency and fairness in promotions and compensation for the outcome of work, and also the possibility of independent decisions regarding ways of performing tasks as well as possibilities for continuous development in line with the defined career path are all decidedly important. Apart from plain appreciation, they understand them as the creation of appropriate conditions for the job position.

Table No. 2. Effectiveness of Selected Motivational Instruments by Age Group (percentage of responses confirming effectiveness)

No.	Most important factor	Up to 35	36–45	46–55	Over 56	Total
1.	Appreciation and expressions of acknowledgement by the superior	80	73	66	75	74
2.	Bonuses dependent on work effects	83	68	67	77	73
3.	Clear criteria for remuneration and promotions	82	64	67	72	71
4.	Possibilities of continuous development	82	67	65	64	71
5.	Maintenance of direct contacts between the superior and the team	79	64	66	66	69
6.	Partner-like relations with superiors	77	63	62	60	67
7.	Organization of company holidays and integrational trips	65	53	52	37	55

Source: Own study on the basis of ILSS research.

The oldest employees (those over 56 years of age), apart from the all-important employment stability and fair remuneration related to effects, look for good atmosphere and good relations within the company with both superiors and other workers. These should be based on partnership, mutual respect, and collaboration. What is important for this group is the trust of the superior and respect for accumulated experience expressed in the right to independently decide how tasks are to be performed, for example. This is a source of satisfaction from work that is very highly rated by this group of employees. Moreover, people in this age category also stress the weight of equal treatment of all employees.

Persons in the 35–45 and 46–55 age groups do not defer very much in their answers. The most effective motivation for them to work is a rich offer of additional benefits that facilitate life, such as life insurance and medical care. Additionally, they appreciate all solutions directed at parents, such as financing for summer camp and recreation. Also important to them are relations with their superior and the superior’s expressions of acknowledgement as well as good communications.

The Actions of Employers in the Sphere of Managing Employees of Various Ages

The ILSS research makes possible the presenting of a diagnosis of employers' approaches to age diversity in subordinate worker teams and employee reaction. In part, this knowledge stems from the questionnaire directed to workers. Most of those surveyed are of the view that their companies do notice the different needs and expectations of people belonging to various age categories (without any marks of discrimination). However, the oldest workers, those over 56, sense an insufficiently individualized approach on the part of the employer relatively often.

More than half (54% of those surveyed) claim that age has no impact on their treatment by their employer so it is not a premise for unequal treatment of employees and discrimination. It is particularly the youngest age group that trusts their employer in this regard, but this is also true of the 46–55 age group (59% and 57%, respectively). The oldest are the most skeptical and reserved in expressing a positive opinion (45%). This confirms the need to introduce diversity management, especially generation management. Age management instruments do not break the principle of equal treatment. The “fight against age barriers and/or promotion of age diversity help create an environment in which individual employees are capable of utilizing their potential and are not in a worse situation due to age” (Kołodziejczyk, 2014, p. 38, as cited in Naegele, and Walker, 2006).

The oldest workers confirm care expended by the company to guarantee them needed work–life balance rarely (46% as compared with 60% in the case of the youngest). Consistently, somewhat less old employees acknowledge the level of their remuneration as being comparable with the earnings of other people of similar competencies who are employed at similar job positions in the company. Non-disadvantaged in this regard make up 49% of the oldest and 59% of the youngest. However, almost 38% of the oldest do not see links between the effects of their work and the level of received remuneration, where increasingly younger groups stress such an interdependence (over 55% of the youngest). Over half (52%) feel that the superior takes their views into account. The share of those in the youngest age category who are pleased for this reason is the largest (almost 60%). It is they who maintain that they feel treated as partners for this reason.

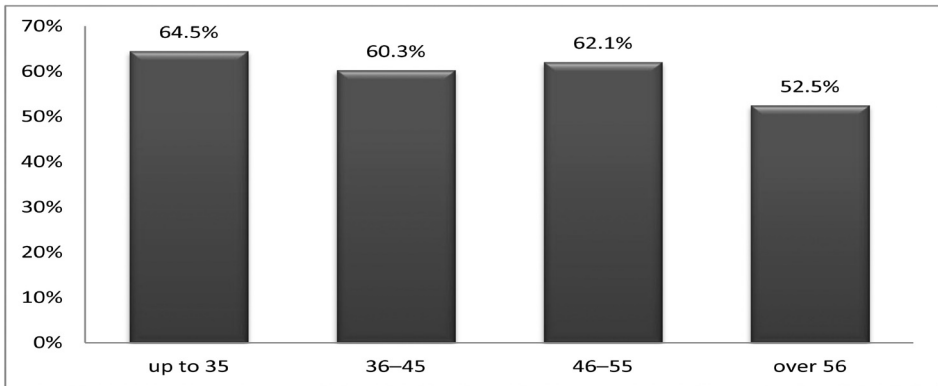
Company care for the health of employees is becoming increasingly universal, where accessibility to healthcare solutions is not significantly diversified in the assessment of people from various age categories. Employees value the ability to benefit from flexible working time. This is in spite of the fact that an average of 60% of employees cannot benefit from it. The availability of this instrument was most

often felt by employees aged up to 35, who simultaneously benefited from support for families with small children.

In summarizing the above-presented questions of age diversity, it may be stated that it is difficult to speak of discrimination and an underappreciation of older workers and favoritism for younger ones, although there is a certain want and sense of insufficient appreciation in the case of people over 56 years of age.

Informing employees of work results is of importance in building engagement. In 61% of cases employees felt sufficiently informed, where people aged up to 35 seem to be slightly favored in this regard, as opposed to the medium age groups. However, the differences are not great. Equal access to training and development programs is usually a touchy matter. As to the discussed research, preferences were noted for the youngest employees (up to 35) coupled with difficulties for the oldest. The percentage breakdown of variously aged employee opinions regarding access to development programs and training is presented in Figure No. 2.

Figure No. 2. Share of positive variously aged employees regarding accessibility of development programs and training.



Source: Own study on the basis of ILSS research.

The degree to which various employee groups submit to the organizational culture is important in the management of people. In the examined population it was confirmed that 66% of employees know the key values of the organizational culture of the company. It was the young who confirmed familiarity most (71%) and the oldest the least (63%). It is also true that primarily the young (60%) share the values promoted by company organizational culture, where only 50% of the oldest agree with them. This does create a certain barrier to managing a team of workers

that might prove incohesive in this regard. It was confirmed that a significant role in building the engagement of employees is played by their direct superior. They have a large impact on the working atmosphere in the company.

The research encompassed medium and large companies. In the medium-sized companies, those employing 50 to 249, efforts aimed at increasing employee engagement are undertaken less frequently and their packet is more modest than in the case of the larger organizations. If it does exist then it is usually informal in character and any bonuses are arbitrary. Thus, it was particularly confirmed that diverse approaches to employees of various age are rarely applied. There is no diversity management almost as a rule. The situation is different in large organizations. However, it continues to be true that diversity management understood as a human resource management strategy aimed at the conscious application of practices taking into account, tolerating, and appreciating the values inherent in differences (Jamka, 2011, p. 233) is sporadic. It was just confirmed in 3% of all companies that were studied, and these included major international corporations that place a lot of weight on diversity and monitor it on the level of the entire group. They also appreciate questions of generation balance.

The panel of experts summing up the project made it possible to make certain that the major corporations do see generational balance as a road to efficiency, creativity, and innovativeness. Through age management they have the possibility of guaranteeing continuity of knowledge and organizational know-how. Creating diverse job teams, apart from improving their efficiency and creativity by guaranteeing various views on the analyzed question, made it possible to mutually get to know each other and break through stereotypes in opinions regarding other as yet unknown groups of workers in the related cases. Statements were made during the debate maintaining that diversity increases engagement and motivation, which cannot be overrated by the company. Age is the most obvious diversifying factor in a worker team.

Worth stressing is that as a whole the examined group does include companies that do not apply strategic diversity management, see diversity, and use its various instruments in order to most effectively manage a diverse team. Interviews have demonstrated that whether or not an organization appreciated the impact of engagement on the achievement of goals or if it applies an engagement building program stems directly from the views of the managerial staff with respect to these matters and the type of activity. Instruments aimed at managing age are applied most frequently. Most interested companies indicate a high level of remuneration as compared with the market offer as being a very important and effective motivator for employees and they appreciate the weight of employment stability for

older workers. The primary offer directed to the youngest group is often supported by paid internship programs during their education (college, technical school, and vocational school). Employers explain that this is not an effort to push away older workers, but a reaction to the state of the labor market. In their turn, the oldest employees are presented with a broader healthcare offer and many efforts are made to motivate them through greater independence and participation in mentor programs. Employers that were aware of diversity often warned against “compartmentalization” of employees into specific groups in contrast to an individualized approach to people and their talents, seeing this as a source of engagement as well as success.

Summary

The discussed research paints a picture of employees in a varied age cross-section, but not necessarily differing all that much in terms of views. However, it can be noted that the oldest employee group, those over 56 years of age, consists of people who demonstrate a lower level of satisfaction, a certain sense of underappreciation, and a want of individualized approach by the employer. Moreover, these people seem somewhat more difficult to manage and incorporate into a cohesive organizational culture. These are significant impediments to molding a staff that is fully engaged in company matters. As maintained by other researchers, this may bear witness to errors in management stemming from a bypassing of the needs of various groups of employees (Rodgers and Hunter, 2003, p. 223). It seems that the basis of success is a striving for the creation of diverse teams. Such an opinion was expressed by enthusiasts for diversity management as well as employers who took part in the ILSS research in the role of experts. However, honesty requires the presentation of the opposite opinions maintaining that diversity related to demographic characteristics is negatively tied with the efficiency of the work of a team. In his overview of research, Z. Piskorz (2013, p. 160) concludes that teams that are diverse in terms of age, sex, and nationality are less efficient than homogeneous ones in this regard. However, with respect to age, the results proved statistically insignificant. Moreover, when the assessment of effects was made by direct superiors, a positive link was found between the age of team members and effectiveness.

ILSS research confirmed the importance of the role of the manager and his or her significant support, the creation of an organizational culture that is friendly to people of all ages, assigning them satisfying tasks as well as additional roles. What is important is the systematic monitoring of satisfaction and expectations. It is then that the application of engagement building instruments can become fully effective.

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Oczekiwania pracowników w różnym wieku, jako podstawa budowy systemów zaangażowania opartych na zasadach zarządzania różnorodnością – badania IPiSS

Streszczenie

Skuteczne zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi, które ostatecznie ma przynieść wymierne efekty biznesowe, wiąże się z potrzebą określenia zestawu instrumentów służących budowie zaangażowania. W artykule przedstawiono wyniki badania opinii i oczekiwań pracowników, usystematyzowane według grup wiekowych, oraz badania pracodawców pod kątem zarządzania różnorodnością, w szczególności pracownikami w różnym wieku. Analiza ma na celu określenie skutecznych czynników budowy zaangażowania zróżnicowanego wiekowo zespołu.

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