

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY OF PEOPLE AGED OVER 50 IN THE PODLASKIE VOIVODSHIP

For several years Poland has been experiencing major social, political and economic changes. These changes concern the labour market. The need to ensure social security and retirement for aging populations has become now an important challenge of the modern labour market, both in Poland and in other EU countries. The activities geared towards this objective should be taken today, because in the next 20 years the population of young Europeans will decrease by 20%. Steps should be taken in order to increase employment rates - which will guarantee the maintenance of economic growth. In this context, exploiting the potential of people aged over 50 is one of the key issues. Changes are also needed in many other fields, such as retirement and pension schemes, taxation and education. Also the need of changes in people's mentality should be emphasized, in order to make people aged over 50 more and more likely to remain professionally active.

In 2011, at the request of the Regional Labour Office in Białystok, the study of professional activity of people aged over 50 was completed. The study was conducted for the purposes of the project "Podlasie Social Policy Observatory". The study's results will allow local authorities, labour market institutions and public employment services to better understand the socio-professional specific of people aged over 50. They will also allow meeting the challenge of the possibly most comprehensive exploitation of the potential of people aged over 50 from Podlaskie voivodship.

Beside the demographic situation, challenges for the labour market in Podlaskie in the coming years will be posed by the persistent effects of the economic crisis. These effects have great influence on personnel decisions of the employers, who are very cautious about hiring employees in general and people aged over 50 in particular.

In Poland, people aged over 50 are relatively inactive on the labour market. In the fourth quarter of 2009, only 29.9% of this population in Poland was employed, while in European Union this rate was 32.1%.

Polish people spend more time in retirement age, and less on the labour market, which certainly needs to be changed, with regards to the present demographic situation. People aged over 50 constituted about 1/5 of registered unemployed in December 2009 (20.7%). The reasons for the low activity of people aged over 50 years are, among others: the difficult situation on the labour market, high unemployment, high labour costs (resulting in a small number of new jobs and the employing of young and well educated persons), the development of new technologies that are difficult to assimilate for people aged over 50, the widespread beliefs about the characteristics of the people aged over 50 (less flexibility, more frequent diseases, reluctance to training and learning of foreign languages) that discourage employers from hiring these people, and the policy of the state that withdraws people aged over 50 from the labour market (effect of the social security system).

End of prosperity of the global economy that took place in 2008 had the negative impact on the labour market in Podlaskie. It was reflected mainly by increasing the unemployment rates. The year 2010, however, saw a partial slowdown of this alarming tendency. The unemployed registered in labour offices at the end of 2010, in the Podlaskie voivodship constituted 13.2% of the economically active population. At the end of 2009 (fourth quarter), number of working persons aged over 50 in Podlaskie was 119 thousand people. The employment rate in this group amounted to 28.8% and was lower than the national average by more than one percentage point.

Registered unemployment among people aged over 50 in 2009 amounted to 13 217 (including 4 618 women). The percentage of unemployed men, forming almost 2/3 of this group, was larger than the percentage of unemployed women (in the overall population of the unemployed in the Podlaskie, the share of men was slightly above 50%). A significant group (24.5%, slightly above the national average) was constituted by those who had been unemployed for more than 24 months - most of whom (60.1%) were men. Group of people aged over 50 in the Podlaskie voivodship is thus characterized by its increasing participation in the general population of the voivodship, with the employment rate that is significantly lower than the national average.

The actions on the field of social integration, vocational activation and education of persons aged over 50 base on the Employment Promotion Act of 20 April 2004. The tasks specified in the Act are carried out by the state on the basis of National Action Plan for Employment, developed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. At the regional level, the action plan for employment is prepared by the voivodship's self-government. Analyses have shown that in the future more emphasis should be put on the distinction of the people aged over 50 (employed, unemployed, inactive and inactive) in the action plan for employment, since this group is as a beneficiary with special needs.

In the Podlaskie successful actions are taken for activation, training and employment of persons aged over 50. Since 2005, a systematic decrease in long-term unemployment rate in this group is observed. The continued momentum of positive change in this area is driven inter alia by the fact that in Podlaskie, there is more and more training institutions that offer support to the members of the 50+ group. However, the scope of the offered support, still remains inadequate to the scale of needs. The effective access to services, educational institutions and support for people aged over 50 varies depending on powiat, and not always satisfies the needs of local labour markets.

The projects implemented within Sub-measure 6.1.1 of OP HC (Operational Programme Human Capital) are effective and well-evaluated (by both the representatives of labour market institutions, and the people aged over 50) tools, counteracting the unemployment among people aged over 50. The study has also shown that the situation of persons aged over 50 could also be improved by creating a database of employers to the idea of hiring people aged over 50, rewarding and promoting these employers (for example, in the provincial competition), increased financing for people aged over 50, the

implementation of training allowing persons aged over 50 to gain practical skills compatible with the expectations of local employers, and organizing more professional practice programs for people aged over 50.

The major reasons for the lack of employment among people aged over 50 next to receiving pension, are: belief in the absence of job offers (shared by 21% of survey respondents) and personal situation (17%). According to the employers, professional passiveness of the people aged over 50 is caused by, first the labour market situation, second the employers' cautious attitude to hiring these people, third the people's believe that they have no chance for finding a job in general, and a job satisfying their minimal expectations in particular. According to the employers, people aged over 50, due to their specific characteristics (such as decreasing adaptability and the frequent lack of job-seeking abilities), find giving up job-seeking activities the best solution of their situation. This attitude is often associated with claiming social benefits (pension, retirement, early retirement).

The quantitative study showed that 83.5% of persons aged over 50 in Podlaskie Voivodship do not actively seek job (in order to change their professional status or change the job performed so far). Among the reasons for not making attempts to find or change jobs people aged over 50 mentioned: personal reasons, illness, lack of ideas for seeking a new job work, lack of financial motivation for working, difficulty related to finding their place on the labour market and unwillingness to work. Professional passiveness is rooted strongly in the minds unemployed people aged over 50. Despite the activities aimed at preventing professional inactivity such as consultancy, training, meetings or projects within the OP HC, unemployed members of the 50+ group are often afraid of even trying to seek employment – thinking for example that, because of their age, they have no chance for finding a job. A common excuse for professional inactivity, given by the people aged over 50, is the fear of the stress related to seeking the job and the possibility of not finding it. Persons aged over 50, especially these on low level of education, not only do not want to work or learn, but very often also take measures aimed at early retirement or obtaining benefits that enable them to maintain the standard of living similar to this of working people. Changing employers' the perception of long-term unemployed aged over 50 is possible by taking measures to increase the 50+ people's willingness to use flexible forms of employment. The measures should also be taken in order to raise the people's need for mobility and intensify the training of long-term unemployed in accordance with current (and constantly monitored) needs of the employers.

Analysis brought a varied picture of the professional experience of the people aged over 50. Because of the people's age, their professional experience is longer than in other age groups, but the quality of the experience is dependent on both the level of education, and the factors that could be described collectively as the people's approach to work. Despite having the professional experience of the more than 20 years, for up to 71% of respondents, hiring people aged over 50 does not always seem to be a good investment.

Beside factors such as health and outdated skills, employers indicated that a common problem for people aged over 50 is their incompatibility with the reality of the modern labour market, as well as the approach to work resembling the communist system (the latter two factors are characteristic rather for people with low level of education, usually long-term unemployed). Analyses have also shown that employers recognize the advantages of workers aged over 50, which include primarily the availability, loyalty as and conscientiousness. In terms of the availability of the people aged over 50 are evaluated even better than young workers with school-age children.

CATI (computer-assisted telephone interviewing) survey showed that 29% the people aged over 50 are interested in further education (improving their qualifications). The people interested in further education are usually persons with secondary education, wishing to continue their studies, or language courses and specialized training. The study showed the overall low interest for professional retraining as well as improving interpersonal skills and application writing skills among people the people aged over 50. Nevertheless, in the opinion of both employers and representatives of labour market institutions, implementation of the above courses should be continued in the target group constituted by the unemployed the people aged over 50. This is especially important in the light of the study's showing that people aged over 50, especially long-term unemployed and inactive, have a much smaller chance of finding work than young people – who are their biggest competitors.

Nearly 60% of persons aged over 50 assesses their chances of finding work in the local market as very low. In addition, the employed people aged over 50 live with a sense of fear of losing their jobs. Persons aged over 50 are convinced that the employers apply discriminatory practices to them, moreover, employers more or less openly confirm that. In view of the difficulties in finding work, people aged over 50 are familiar with undeclared (tax-free) work as well as working abroad. The study also shown that people aged over 50 are relatively inactive (compared to the labour market requirements) in their efforts to find a work (for example they rarely used such forms of seeking a job as job fairs). Information about job opportunities is mostly from the Internet, friends and the Poviast Labour Office. They nostalgically recall the communist times when work was a good accessible to everyone and are unable to present themselves to a potential employer in a manner consistent with current standards.

Another problem identified in the study of the situation of people aged over 50 in Podlaskie is the purely declarative nature of their willingness to undertake training and employment. Although the CATI survey showed the people's high willingness for accepting work that would require travelling, or even traveling abroad, the information gathered from other research techniques does not confirm that. In this context, special attention has to be paid to the people aged over 50, who are affected by long-term unemployment. In their case, return to the labor market requires overcoming many psychological and mental barriers, as well as changing their personal habits. The study has however demonstrated that

people who participated in activities aimed at professional activation and increasing their chances for finding a job (without aborting the training) appreciate the quality of the received support, both in terms opportunities to improve their own situation, and in terms of the impact of the activities on their psychical condition.

