

Shaping the change: Preparing older workers for digitisation

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Shaping demography, diversity and digitisation – a model for intergenerational management (Part 4 of 4)

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Digitisation and its associated challenges

‘Digital progress’ has evolved from a buzzword to a phenomenon that affects almost all areas of business and administration. Whether in production, sales or services, working methods are changing and employees are constantly faced with new challenges and requirements. At the same time, the shelf life of knowledge is decreasing and lifelong learning is becoming a fundamental requirement for all employees who want to be and remain competitive in the labour market. The relationship between digitalisation and demography will never be immune to stereotyped thinking and behaviour, which form a fresh challenge for future diversity management.

Are older employees finding it harder to ‘keep up’ with change? Do they need other concepts or learning content? Or do they lose the ability to learn after a certain age and are left unable to ‘cope’ with new technologies? On the other hand, many members of this group of employees still have five, ten or fifteen years of professional life ahead of them. Can an organisation afford to overlook this group of employees? Does this not feed bias and existing stereotypes?

Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning and the ability to deal with new circumstances are already important skills today and will remain so in the future, considering how digital processes also change job profiles and tasks. There is a need for stronger analytical or systemic thinking, the number of routine jobs is decreasing, and interactions between humans and software are becoming normalised. Alongside the change in current occupations, there will be jobs that influence our world of work in the near future – even though these jobs don’t yet exist. Completely new digital training occupations and fields of study are already emerging as existing training paths are being overhauled.

The change in activities and job profiles means that, in future, both highly qualified and less qualified people will be needed. For example, highly qualified employees develop new technologies, evaluate data and draw conclusions. But there will still be jobs for the less qualified, as technology supports them in their work and increases their productivity, for example.

Skills for the future

Against this backdrop, lifelong learning is more important than ever for all ages and occupational groups. Future-oriented skills and the safe use of modern technology play a central role in this.

Info box: Skills for a modern and digital working environment

Which skills, apart from acquired expertise and ‘digital skills’, will become more important in the future if employees are to successfully master digital and other changes and navigate the new world of work? Examples:

- Ability to cope with change
- Resilience
- Social skills

- Media and communication skills
- Abstract and analytical thinking
- Holistic and joined-up thinking
- Self-organisation skills
- Learning skills

Whether older workers are less able to keep up with the digital change has been a recurrent subject of debate. There is a concern that they find it harder to navigate a world of work in which familiar structures are uprooted or to quickly familiarise themselves with new ways of working and learn new skills. Unlike the younger generations, older employees were not born into the 'digital revolution' and are not digital natives. Nevertheless, technological developments are nothing new: older employees have always been required to cope with technological changes in the world of work. What has changed is the pace at which digitisation is taking place, representing drastic changes for all employees of all ages.

The ability to cope with digitisation is not a question of age

So is the ability to successfully adapt to digitisation a question of age?

Absolutely not! In particular due to the increasing integration of new software into daily work and the stark changes and streamlining of processes this leads to, employees of all age groups must be involved – regardless of their age. The success of new software solutions depends largely on how they are used in the future. In that sense, it is important to appeal to and support different target groups – young and old, qualified and less qualified – individually, and ensure that they understand the purpose of the current or future software architecture. It also increasingly makes sense to promote employee involvement in development processes, including software implementation and process design.

It has been known for many years that appropriate training can go a long way in maintaining learning abilities and mental fitness into old age. Nevertheless, given the changing framework conditions for learning, it is only natural that learning objectives take longer to attain or that the learning content needs to be reworked.

Creating a basis that sustains employees' motivation, their willingness to change and personal responsibility for their own development is crucial in this regard. Continuous training and qualifications are therefore key to maintaining the willingness to learn and perform. Again, this is not a question of age, but applies to all employees. And the process begins as early as on-boarding.

Requirements of the new learning world – Intergenerational learning

Equal treatment of all employees is a great value; age must not be stigmatised. Development perspectives, both horizontal and vertical, must therefore be independent of a person's years. For example, the more natural the exchange between younger and older employees is, the less an individual's own learning ability is put in the spotlight. Specific programmes for older people therefore have little use in this sense, which supports the principle that 'what is good for younger people is also good for those with years of experience.' It is important to promote intergenerational learning and make facilities and other resources available for this purpose (e.g. experimental spaces). Besides this, approaches such as reverse mentoring offer new perspectives, as do mentoring, learning support or learning sponsorships. Learning divided in bite-size chunks, close to the workplace and with a practical slant is more likely to succeed than large-scale seminar series. Digitisation therefore requires new learning environments beyond face-to-face formats and blended learning.

Behind the scenes. A practical example: thyssenkrupp Steel**Practice box: Academies at thyssenkrupp Steel**

Employees of thyssenkrupp Steel Europe AG can participate in further training programs at various academies. The Academies for Research & Development, Finance and Sales complement the entire further training concept. But the unique thing about it is: the people teaching at the Academies are from the company's own ranks. True to the motto 'from practice, for practice', the Academies have many experienced and long-standing employees who train their colleagues.

With their interdisciplinary structure, the training courses benefit new employees in their on-boarding phase and, more specifically, teach key qualifications and skills for day-to-day tasks. The knowledge shared by long-standing employees is particularly beneficial.

Tandems or team-oriented project structures

A fairly straightforward but very effective approach is to establish tandems between younger and experienced, older employees. These work in two directions. While younger employees are often more experienced and comfortable in dealing with new media, their older colleagues have a head start in terms of experience, for example in interpreting data. The way in which the existing skills are valued and employees are able to hone new ones in a safe space strengthens teamwork and understanding between generations. The same applies to the establishment of interdisciplinary and mixed-generation project teams: project managers benefit from the many years of experience of the older employees and new working methods of the younger ones.

Practice box: Mobile working at thyssenkrupp Steel

The introduction of a works agreement on mobile working at thyssenkrupp Steel Europe AG laid a solid foundation for a healthier work-life balance. Being able to work remotely not only appeals to young people, given that older employees in particular have a wide range of professional and private obligations that need to be reconciled as well.

During the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic, the company already had a solid legal basis for all parties involved. Experience shows that both younger and older employees can work from home very effectively (during the pandemic). Thanks to a comprehensive collaborative platform and with the help of technical equipment, remote working has proven to be successful in projects as well.

Communication is a key success factor

Though often undervalued, communications on digital change play a decisive role. They can help to get older employees excited about digitisation and introduce them to new digital processes, workflows or procedures. But it is also crucial that communications highlight the high degree of practical application and suitability of digitisation for everyday use. If employees experience the benefits and advantages and see positive examples in their work, this increases their willingness to embark on the journey together.

Practice box: 'Hidden Champions' for the roll-out of a new collaborative platform

Rolling out new software throughout an organisation is a major challenge. A mixed-generation team of employees from different disciplines was able to thoroughly test the new collaborative platform before the official launch and was trained in the platform's tools, options and capabilities. After the launch, they were the point of contact for employees who had questions about how to use the system. This immediately created a positive image of the

new digital working environment for all employees – whether young or experienced.

Conclusion: digital change is changing the world of work

Digital change has far-reaching consequences for the world of work. Both older and younger employees must be involved in the digital journey and adapt and develop their skills and abilities, both on the job and in a lifelong sense. To support this continual process, managers are needed to create and inspire learning-friendly working environments. They have an active role to play in shaping digital and other change. But managers need support from human resources management, such as in managing mixed-age teams. Being open to new things, avoiding stereotypes, offering opportunities to learn in safe spaces and enabling exchanges between groups of employees are just some of the factors that help to prepare the workforce for digitisation processes.

Read part 1, part 2, and part 3 of this 4 part series.



Since 2012, Carolin has been working on a variety of aspects at the company, including the strategic direction of demographic management and life-phase orientation for the steel sector.

She is also involved in German and European research projects on HR issues. Previously, she worked on various demography projects at the Institute of Gerontology at the TU Dortmund University.

Life-phase demographic management at thyssenkrupp Steel Europe.

Based on a 'collective demographic agreement' for the German iron and steel industry (Demografie-Tarifvertrag), thyssenkrupp Steel Europe has been developing a systematic demographic management system for over ten years now. In recent years, this system has been consistently geared to life and career phase orientation, accompanied by publications on the intranet and other supporting materials. The company has also further developed a large number of measures aimed at promoting a healthy work-life balance over the past years. These include the 'Stahlsternchen' company kindergarten for up to 90 children of employees in Duisburg, or the 'care folder' that provides information to employees who are wondering how to reconcile their care duties with work. A milestone in 2019 was the extensive company agreement on mobile working, which has played an essential role (especially during the COVID-19 pandemic) in enabling employees to work from home on a regular basis. In order to strengthen their physical and mental health, employees have access to a wide range of occupational health management and social services.

Vocational rehabilitation focuses on employees whose performance has been impacted due to illness or other life events. Preventative policies and a modern working environment help to strengthen autonomous and equal participation in office and working life. The holistically designed on-boarding process for new employees, as well as in-company role switches, help new team members to quickly get settled in their new company's culture. Alongside the successful pilot project to improve understanding between young and old, the company has for years been running highly rated workshops that prepare employees for their imminent retirement.

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