

LABOUR MARKET IN THE CONDITIONS OF GENERATIONAL CHANGES. SELECTED RESEARCH RESULTS

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Purpose: The main purpose of the article is to present the value of age diversity and its beneficial impact on current and future existence of companies in time of demographic crisis. There is the urgent need observed to implement the age diversity management due to increasing number of seniors and decreasing number of young labour force. What is more, in the article the chosen results of the author's research project in that sphere of interest are presented.

Design/methodology/approach: The study was conducted among thirty-two small and eighteen medium-sized companies located in Poznań poviat. Four research criteria were adopted. CATI and PAPI methods were used to collect the answers.

Findings: According to the study, majority of chosen companies might be called reactive due to the fact that only three companies have so far implemented the age diversity management concept. The idea of mixed teams is not popular in surveyed companies. What is more, 78% of respondents have experienced stereotypes about old age.

Research limitations/implications: The biggest limitation of research is the number of respondents. What is more, future studies should concentrate in more detailed way on stereotapes, skills and more information should be got about the way the companies function on the market.

Practical implications: It is important to explain company's managers the negative aspects of elderying processes on labour market and teach them how to prevent from them by implementing the age diversity management.

Social implications: Adapting both workplaces and working hours to seniors' needs and expectations and creating friendly atmosphere at work are the main conditions to create high level of work satisfaction and - as a result to - prolong senior's activity on labour market.

Originality/value: The originality is sought in examination wheatear companies take into consideration demographic trends while managing the chosen companies and in recalling recommendations for future.

Keywords: age diversity, age management, demographic trends.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Over the last years, demographic phenomena have become the center of particular interest of economists. There is no doubt that the size and structure of the workforce resources have a strong impact on the economic development opportunities of individual countries. Current data on the population, including those characterizing, inter alia, median age, life expectancy, the share of people 65+ in the population structure, as well as their forecasts force one to reflect. According to the UN Report, the global fertility rate will fall from 2.3 in 2021 to 2.1 in 2050, life expectancy will increase from 71 years in 2021 to 77.2 in 2050. On the other hand, the share of older people (65+), estimated at 9.7 in 2022, will reach almost twice as high in 2050 (16.4%) (UN, 2022). These data undoubtedly prove that modern economies are experiencing a demographic transformation in which the population structure changes from a progressive through stagnant form to a regressive one. The process of population ageing is now global and irreversible. Of course, there is no doubt that the dynamics of this phenomenon is closely correlated with socio-economic development. "A higher level of development means a higher quality of life, and thus a lower fertility rate and longer life expectancy, which increases the share of older people in the population" (Jurek, 2012, p. 23). The opposite relationship occurs in less developed regions, although the growing old age rate is currently observed there as well.

Poland also does not deviate from this negative trend. And so, the fertility rate in 2022 was at the level of 1.29 with the EU average of 1.46. It is worth noting here that its lower level was recorded only in Spain (1.16), Italy (1.24) and Lithuania (1.27) (Total..., 2024). According to forecasts, in 2050 it will increase slightly to 1.55 in our country, which – however - will still be significantly below the simple replacement rate assumed at 2.1 (Assumptions..., 2023). On the other hand, the median age in 2023 for Pole was 42.6 (for the EU – 44.5) (Population structure..., 2023), but according to the projection, in 2050 it will be even 7 years higher (49.6). Such a state will place Poland among the oldest countries in Europe, next to such countries as Lithuania (52.9), Greece (51.8), Italy and Portugal (51.6) and Spain (50.2) (Demographic..., 2023). Life expectancy will increase from 73.4 years for men and 81.1 years for women to 80.3 and 86.6 years, respectively, in 2050 (Projected..., 2023). In addition, the share of people 65+ in the population will increase from 19.9% for last year to 40.4% in 2050 (Leśniak, 2021). Also, the old-age dependency ratio (the ratio of people 65+ to the population aged 15-54) will increase from 30.8 in 2022 (Population structure..., 2023) to 50.5 in 2050 (Demographic..., 2023). It is worth adding here that the aging of our society is not only the result of negative birth rate, progress in medicine and an increase in the calorific value of the diet, but also it is the effect of economic emigration of the younger generation as a consequence of accession to the EU in 2004. What is more, we cannot forget that people from the so-called “post-war baby boom generation” are also now aging.

The ongoing changes in the number and structure of the population will be felt especially on the labour market of individual national economies (Bloom, Zucker, 2023). "Considering this phenomenon in terms of a threat results from the scale and nature of the effects associated with it on the economy and society. Firstly, it is emphasised that the consequence of a decrease in the number of young people entering the labour market with a simultaneous increase in the number of older workers will be a much lower renewability of labour resources. Subsequently, this may lead to a decrease in the value of human capital, due to the fact that mainly young people are more creative. In addition, the ageing workforce is less susceptible to adapting to the rapidly changing labour market. This is related to the existence of a negative correlation between age and mobility and flexibility" (Cichorzewska et al., 2015, p. 22). Researchers also raise concerns about the faster extinction of certain industries due to the potential shortage of specialists qualified decades ago to operate specialized machines and technological processes, which are not of interest in the current education system (Cichorzewska et al., 2015).

Therefore, the observed generational imbalance in the labour market forces the owners of modern enterprises to revise the current way of managing human resources and to take into account the issue of age. For this reason, more business practitioners see an opportunity to continue functioning on a competitive market in the implementation of the concept of age management. This idea is identified with rational and effective management of diversified human capital and focuses on "creating a work environment in which each person is respected, appreciated and has the opportunity to use individual capabilities for the development of the company" (Lewicka, 2010, p. 227).

The aim of the article in its first part is to present the concept of age-based diversity management and to indicate the benefits resulting from it for both the employee, the company and the economy as a whole. In the second part selected results of own research study, conducted among fifty respondents 50+ employed in small and medium-sized enterprises in the area of the labour force aging process, were presented. The article verifies three research hypotheses. In the conclusion a wide set of recommendations for the surveyed companies are recalled.

2. Age management as the element of human capital diversity management

As a consequence of advancing demographic trends, the use of older labour is becoming a necessity (Scott, 2023). In the near future, companies will need to encourage seniors to work longer. As Ł. Jurek states, in order to run a business efficiently, employers will have to use the potential of older employees to an increasing extent (Jurek, 2012). Such a state will certainly also lead to legislative changes related to the extension of the working age. These circumstances force modern managers to skillfully manage not only the younger generation, often just entering

the labor market, but also the older generation of employees who are already working. In case of large diversity of the workforce in terms of multigenerationality employers need to recognize the specific characteristics and needs of individual generations (Horwitz, Horwitz, 2007). "Each age category within the manufacturing population has different expectations of both themselves, their management and their colleagues. At every stage of professional life, new needs and aspirations appear towards workplaces. Young employees are focused on gaining experience, older employees want their experience to be used. Personnel policy should take into account this diversity and create a field for mutual coexistence and cooperation of these two groups" (Jurek, 2012, p. 152).

For this reason, age management is seen as the opportunity to use the most the potential of the younger and older generations, including the differences between them (Kunze, Toader, 2019). This idea is part of a broader concept called diversity management, according to which the broadly understood diversity of employees is a resource of the company, which under certain conditions can become a source of business benefits and profits (Rawłuszko, 2007). This approach, by adapting places and working conditions to the needs of the staff, is seen, *inter alia*, as an opportunity to maintain the professional activity of people employed at least until they reach the retirement age or even longer. This goal can be achieved by weakening the negative impact of two factors, i.e. pushing employees out and pulling employees out of the workplace. And so, the first group brings together all those elements that relate to the unequal treatment of older workers in the area of improving competences and broadly understood professional development, including promotion and adapting the specifics of work and working conditions to the biological capabilities of people which change with age. The second group consists of institutional factors such as the possibility of early retirement deactivation, as well as the lack of dependence of the amount of the pension on the age at which it can be started (Liwński, Szatnderska, 2010).

Let one note here at once that undoubtedly the owners of modern enterprises have a chance to directly eliminate the negative effects of the factors from the first group mentioned above. The literature indicates a number of benefits resulting from the application of the idea of age management for both the enterprises themselves, employees and the economy as a whole. Among the most frequently mentioned are (Management..., 2010; Age management..., 2019):

1. access to new human resources;
2. recruiting employees in areas (professions) to which young people do not apply;
3. maintaining knowledge, competence, experience in the company;
4. minimizing the costs associated with training employees;
5. correcting the conditions for workplace equipment;
6. improving the atmosphere at work and as the result - the satisfaction of employees;
7. decreasing in sickness absenteeism, increase in productivity and loyalty;
8. increasing production capacity potential;
9. creating the image of a flexible, modern and socially responsible company;

10. acquiring new customers and new partners;
11. making the level of creativity and innovativeness of companies higher;
12. increasing the competitiveness of enterprises and the economy as a whole.

Age management includes a wide range of activities that can be taken by company managers to increase the productivity of older people, which in turn improves their employability. These activities may concern individual phases of the HR process, the employee himself, but also the work environment, which is shaped by employers. As the researchers emphasize, age management uses tools and instruments typical for human resource management, but aimed at the age diversity of the staff. Areas where this concept applies are as follow (Naegele, Walker, 2006):

1. recruitment;
2. continuing education;
3. career development;
4. flexible working hours;
5. health protection and promotion;
6. workplace organization;
7. transfers between posts;
8. employment and retirement.

It is worth noting here that the concept of age diversity management - although it puts the employee of any age in the center of interest - in the time of the aging of the productive population, concentrates its activities, not discriminately, especially at older employees (Szcześniak, 2013).

3. Research assumptions

The negative demographic processes determining the functioning of the labour market have become an inspiration for the author of the article to carry out the project entitled "Age diversity management. Intellectual capital of employees 50+". The basic research problem was to identify the degree to which these entities take into account the phenomenon of age differentiation in the management of their staff. The survey was conducted in 2022-2023 on a research sample of 50 small and medium-sized enterprises. These entities were located in the Poznań district. The selection of companies was based on four criteria. In addition to the aforementioned size of enterprises (small and medium-sized), as well as their location, the issue of the PKD section (section C) and the number of people employed in the appropriate age range (minimum 4 people 50+ and minimum 4 people -39) were also important. It should be added that the selection of entities from this section of PKD was dictated by the fact that it is one of the key industries of Wielkopolska District and is developing most strongly in the Poznań

County (Report from..., 2020). The CATI and PAPI methods were used in the study. The interview questionnaire consisted of 24 questions. Responses were obtained from 32 small and 18 medium-sized enterprises. The average respondent of the survey was 55.9 years old, had been gaining professional experience for about 30 years, and the seniority in the current company was about 8 years.

4. Results of own research – selected content

The basic premise of the study was the statement that the currently observed generational imbalance, which is a consequence of the change in the amount and age structure of the workforce, is a challenge for managers of modern enterprises. Effective diversity management, which is the last highest element of the E. Friday and S.S. Friday model called the continuum of diversity (Friday, E., Friday, S.S., 2003), may be a specific key to the well functioning of enterprises in the face of unfavorable demographic changes. As M. Cichorzewska et al. emphasize, instead of "passively waiting for the crisis caused by diversity, organizations should introduce changes leading from approval to active management. The way to enable organizations to effectively reach the last stage of the diversity continuum is to create a work environment in which each employee could fully realize his/her potential (Cichorzewska et al., 2015, p. 36). Therefore, in the study, inter alia, the following research hypotheses were verified:

- H1) The majority of small and medium-sized enterprises in the Poznań district represents a proactive attitude towards diversity.
- H2) The culture of inclusion is implemented by organizing mixed-age teams in at least half of the companies.
- H3) Respondents 50+ do not experience age stereotyping.

In order to verify the first research hypothesis, the classification of organizations depending on the managers' reaction to diversity, adopted by J.S. Fink, D.L. Pastore and H.A. Riemer (2003), was used. Those researchers identify four types of organizations, i.e. non-responsive, responsive, reactive and proactive. There is no question that the position of a given company in relation to diversity may have both positive and negative consequences for the coexistence and cooperation of employees representing other age ranges. The survey respondents were asked to choose one answer out of four proposed. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 1.*Response to age diversity*

Types of reaction	%
company managers ignore diversity (type: non-responsive organization)	8%
company managers follow legal orders relating to the issue of age diversity of employees (type: responsive organization)	26%
company managers comply with the rules of law relating to the issue of age diversity of employees and intervene on an ad hoc basis in the event of conflicts arising from age diversity (type: reactive organization)	54%
company has implemented a strategy for managing diversity due to age (type: proactive organization)	12%

Source: own work based on research.

As one can observe, the vast majority of respondents (54%) stated that company management both complies with the rules of the law on diversity issues and intervenes on an ad hoc basis in conflict situations related to age. These enterprises can therefore be considered as reactive organizations, and the first hypothesis must therefore be rejected. However, the current state is optimistic, because situations resulting from diversity with negative consequences for the organization most often occur in those organizations that either do not notice the problem of diversity or react to this problem by limiting themselves only to the application of the rules set by law, e.g. related to acts of discrimination, where the employer's obligation is to counteract discrimination in employment, in particular on the basis of gender, age, disability and other legally protected characteristics (Management..., 2010). As M. Cichorzewska et al. rightly emphasize, "neither of them fully benefits from diversity, because it is more of a burden than a capital for them" (Cichorzewska et al., 2015, p. 41). Moreover, the researchers cited here add that "diversity problems are less likely to arise in those organizations that respond to them on an ongoing basis, refusing to let things happen and resolve themselves. On the other hand, where organizations anticipate the possibility of conflict situations and take preventive action, institutionalizing diversity and including it in their strategy, the risk of such problems is minimal, and the greatest benefits of diversity are shared by them". It is worth adding here that - according to the survey - only 6 companies have officially implemented an age management system. What is more, only in 3 of them the system works correctly according to implemented assumptions. The observed situation is consistent with nationwide findings that "despite the observable progress in this area, age management in organizations operating in Poland remains at a not very high level, and the range of implemented solutions is still quite narrow" (Warwas, 2017, p. 34). At the same time, "probably with the intensification of demographic changes, Polish companies will start to reach for older employees more and more often, and the implementation of age management in Polish companies will become more common" (Woszczyk, 2011, p. 158).

There is no doubt that the diversity of work teams in the era of a globalized world is already becoming a fact. Moreover, during the demographic crisis, "it is becoming increasingly difficult to meet groups of employees with a unified age structure" (Filipowicz, 2019, p. 160). Currently, in Polish conditions, five different generations are identified on the labor market, i.e. Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, Generation Z (Cichorzewska et al., 2015).

It is worth noting here that each generation is characterized by a different perception of the surrounding world, which results, *inter alia*, from their value systems, attitudes, behaviors, preferences, predispositions, habits, as well as needs and expectations towards both life and work. "Generational affiliation also has a significant impact on the approach to work, the way of motivation, communication styles, professional experience, the ability to use technology, as well as the ability to shape one's own professional and life goals and strategies for achieving them" (Smolbik-Jęczmień, 2019, p. 96). There is no question that diverse groups face opportunities and threats that are alien to homogeneous groups. However, many researchers point out that "an effective method for a diverse group to succeed is mutual learning from other members of the company, learning diversity" (Cichorzewska et al., 2015, p. 36). In the opinion of the author of the article, performing tasks with each other can be a great way to get to know, appreciate, accept and sensitize to diversity. As a result, survey respondents were asked whether a culture of inclusion is implemented in their companies by organizing mixed-age teams. And so, in only 16 business entities this type of cooperation was identified. Therefore, this state does not allow to accept the second hypothesis. However, it is difficult to clearly indicate whether this is due to the reluctance of employers, resistance of the employees themselves, previous negative experiences of cooperation, and perhaps also may be caused by the specificity of a given company. These aspects should be taken into account in the next study. However, there is no doubt that heterogeneity enriches the group's action through greater creativity and more ways of thinking. "There is an important relationship between diversity and creativity – you cannot be creative without associating ideas that have so far been considered divergent. Since it is a question of linking ideas that were previously distant from each other, the sources of these ideas must also be diverse, and thus creativity is governed by the equation of high risk and high reward. On the other hand, there is a danger of lowering the results of activities, because diversity can also be a source of misunderstandings and conflicts. Differentiation is treated as another type of risk that is taken at the time of building a profitable company. Involving relatively homogeneous groups is less risky and reduces the risk of failure, but the potential for achievement is also more moderate. The more diverse the group, the more difficult it is to manage – but the greater the rewards can be expected in the case of good management" (Cichorzewska et al., 2015, p. 36).

As already mentioned in the article, the basic objective of age diversity management in the time of demographic crisis is to maintain the professional activity of employees at least until they reach the statutory retirement age. This is particularly important in Poland, as our seniors belong to the nations – along with Cypriots and Slovenians – that would like to leave the labour market as soon as possible (Eurostat, 2019). Maintaining this activity requires business owners to pay close attention to the factors that will enable rational and effective use of human resources by taking into account the needs and capabilities of employees of different ages (Liwiński, Sztandera, 2010). It is not only about adapting the workplace to physical needs (ergonomic issues) or working conditions (flexible forms of work and flexible working hours),

but also taking into account factors that directly affect the mental well-being of employees (Emile et al., 2015; Palmore, 2015). There is no question that age diversity can lead to acts of discrimination. The reductive perception of the elderly is commonly seen in repeated stereotypes (Gajowiak, 2020). Let us add here that many stereotypes are associated with old age, and "their appearance results from cultural conditions and from the development of civilization and the increasing life expectancy" (Gajowiak, 2020, p. 61). As A. Rybowska observes, in the past a small number of people lived to a ripe old age, that is why the elderly were respected (Rybowska, 2017). Old age was then perceived as a sign of experience, knowledge, wisdom, contact with supernatural forces, blessing, authority, power, prestige, as well as a time to reap the fruits of life, rest, freedom from temptations and responsibilities (Rybowska, 2017, p. 379). Unfortunately, this approach has changed fundamentally with the development of civilization, greater access to knowledge and information, and the omnipresent cult of youth promoted by the media. "Old age has become a negation of these attributes. It began to be associated with withdrawal, degradation, poverty" (Rybowska, 2017, p. 379). Therefore, the study sought to check whether the respondents 50+ observe the existence and reproduction of stereotypes about old age by younger employees, and if so, what area they concern. Respondents could make a multiple choice from a given set of 10 stereotypes most often mentioned by gerontologists and experts in the phenomenon of ageism. The answers are presented in the chart below.

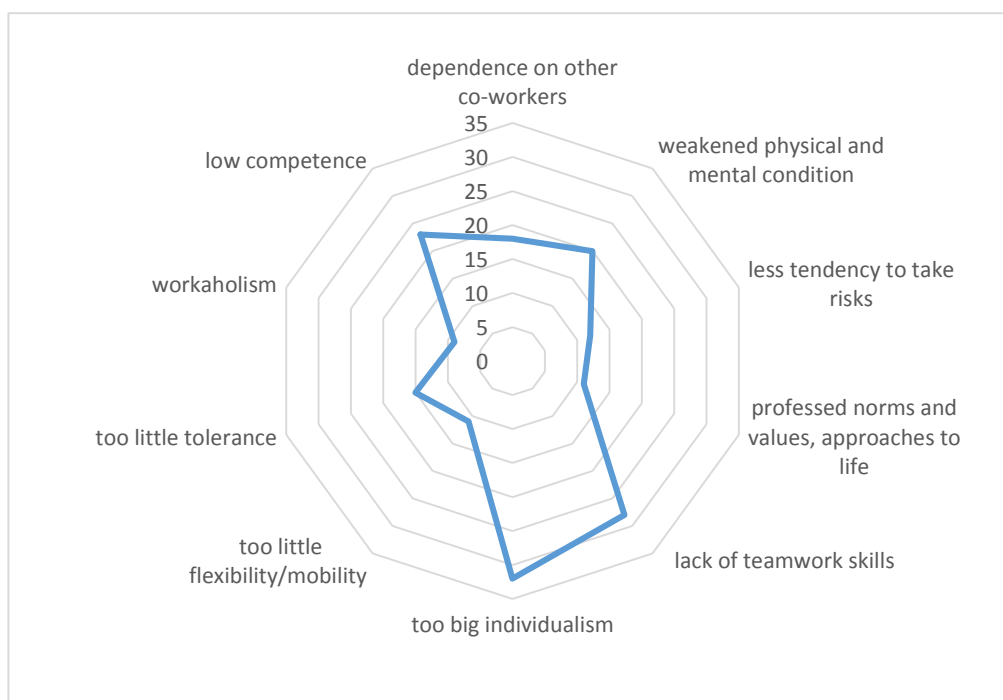


Figure 1. Stereotypes about the elderly.

Source: own work based on research.

According to the collected data, as many as 78% of respondents confirmed the existence of stereotypes about the elderly. Therefore, the third hypothesis must be rejected. Among the three most frequently indicated harmful beliefs were: 1) too big individualism, 2) lack of teamwork skills and 3) low competences. Of course, it is difficult to indicate here to what extent these stereotypes are only passed on between employees and accepted "on faith", and to what extent they result from direct contact with members of a given group. Let us add here that the first method is appropriate for the cultural model, which assumes the "learning" of stereotypes through indirect sources. They are then passed on by family, peers or the media. The second, in turn, is determined by accumulated personal experience (Chechelski, 2007). In the case of the first two stereotypes indicated by the respondents, it is worth adding that the individualism of seniors may result from great experience and commitment to work. However, it is often said about this generation "that work is their whole life: "they live to work" or "they work to survive"" (Smolbik-Jęczmień, 2019). The younger generation, on the other hand, has a quite different approach to life and work nowadays. It is worth referring here to the results of many studies, which in turn show that "older people are more likely to focus on the implementation of tasks by the team than on achieving their own goals. This is because, inter alia, the ability to cooperate and build relationships increases with age. Older people are less competitive than young people. They are not usually perceived as a threat by younger colleagues, because they are less likely to participate in the competition for better positions, that is why they often form the glue of the team" (Management..., 2010, p. 7). In the case of the third stereotype, it is worth pointing out that seniors are very often accompanied by a competence gap. This is due to the fact that "the oldest generations did not have such a wide range of opportunities to study, and the reality of the People's Republic of Poland did not necessarily prefer this type of education. On the other hand, vocational education, marginalized in today's education system, was much more accessible and prospective at that time" (Turek, 2013, p. 88). This is confirmed by data collected by Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS) from 2021, when basic vocational education was most often declared by people in the 45-69 age group, and their share amounted to 58.8% of all people with this level of education (GUS, 2021). It should be added here that according to the data obtained from the interview questionnaire, only four respondents indicated primary education, one - secondary education, 25 - Bachelor's degree and 20 respondents pointed to higher master's education. These answers indicate that in the case of the third most frequently repeated stereotype, its sources should be sought more probable in the cultural model. Of course, it is also indisputable that the modern economy forces the possession of specific competences. According to the report entitled "4th Industrial Revolution in Central and Eastern Europe", employees are expected to have such qualities as: creativity and innovativeness, leadership, perseverance and resilience, flexibility in problem solving, mutual cultural understanding, entrepreneurship, ability to analyze data, dexterity and quick learning (Ciralli, Sabapathy, 2017). In this regard, it is worth adding that the survey took into account six selected key competences and the respondents' answers are presented in the chart below.

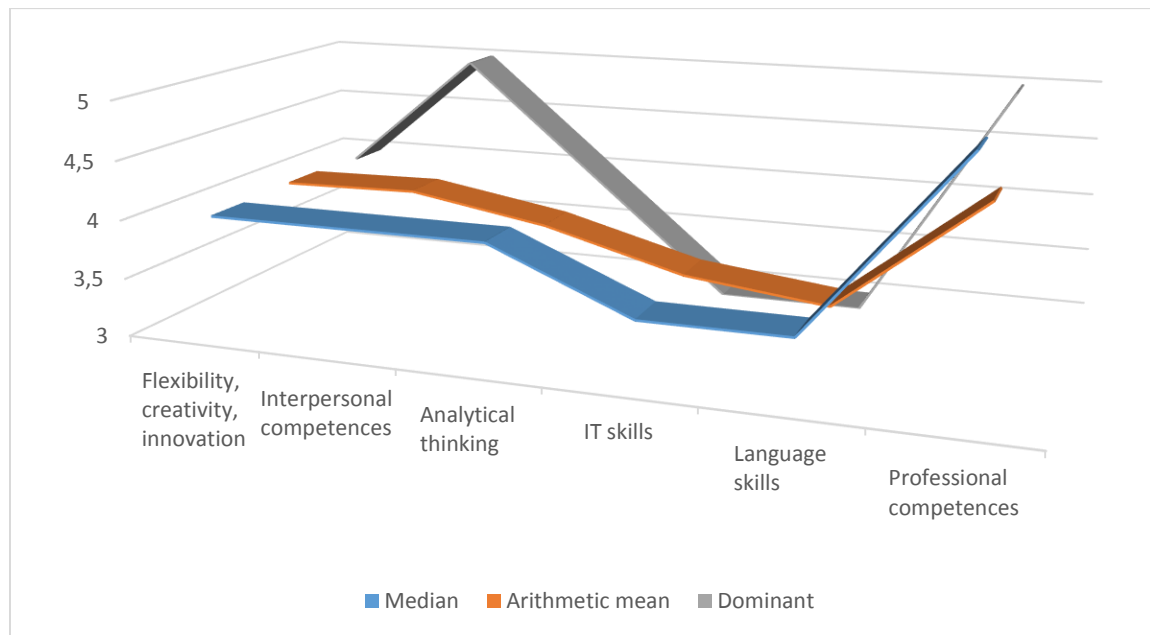


Figure 1. Assessment of competences by respondents.

Source: Own analysis based on research.

It can be noted that the respondents 50+ rated their professional competences very highly, which is justified by their long-term professional experience. The average respondent to the survey has about 30 years of experience behind her/him. On the other hand, language and IT competences were rated the least by workers. However, these answers are justified by the fact that the 50+ generation did not have much opportunity to learn foreign languages in their youth, while "they learned the latest technologies only in adulthood" (Urbaniak et al., 2015, p. 143). Therefore, it can be cautiously concluded that the stereotype regarding the lack of these specific competences is - to some extent - reflected in the surveyed companies. Therefore, company management should take into account the possibility of creating conditions to supplement specific competences through the implementation of training. There is no question that "older employees are able to acquire new knowledge. Learning does not depend on age, but the learning process changes with age. Therefore, it is important to ensure that older workers have access to training and equal opportunities in acquiring new skills and updating professional competences in the process of lifelong learning" (Age Management..., 2015, p. 12).

5. Conclusions

Workforce diversity is not a temporary phenomenon. Homogeneous groups become heterogeneous, and this process is irreversible. "Changes taking place on the global market are becoming the share of national economies and societies, linked by economic dependencies,

political interests, demographic situation, international mobility, and the level of digitization of society" (Przytuła, Krysińska-Kościńska, 2019, p. 57). The anticipated depletion of the workforce, as well as the dynamics of population ageing, is a specific challenge for modern enterprises in the context of the age diversity of the workforce. "In the near future, due to the reduced availability of the "youth potential", they will face the need to involve older workers more. In the new demographic reality, a competitive advantage will be gained by those companies that adapt very quickly their strategy to not only market but also demographic changes" (Cichorzewska et al., 2015, p. 24).

For this reason, the opportunity for effective functioning of enterprises is currently seen in the concept of age management aimed at creating a work environment that will be friendly to employees regardless of their age, taking into account the needs and abilities of the employee depending on their age (see e.g. (Mor Barak et al., 2001; Kaye, Jordan-Evans, 2012)). "It should be added that it is a constantly developing set of methods of investing and nurturing the company's human capital, so that the work of an individual, regardless of age, brings profit to the company and personal satisfaction to employees" (Cichorzewska et al., 2015, p. 25). Therefore, age management is treated as an element of age diversity management of the organization's human capital.

The above findings concerning the functioning of enterprises in the face of the growing demographic crisis have become a reason to conduct a research project in the field of management of age-diverse personnel. The research sample consisted of fifty respondents 50+ employed in small and medium-sized business entities registered in the Poznań district. The CATI and PAPI methods were used in the study. The article presents the results of verification of selected three research hypotheses.

Based on the respondents' answers, in the article the first hypothesis was rejected. Most small and medium-sized enterprises show a reactive rather than a proactive attitude. Managers of these companies comply with the principles of law relating to the issue of age diversity of employees and intervene on an ad hoc basis in the event of conflicts arising from age diversity. Formally, only 6 companies can be considered proactive, but in fact - as indicated by the survey respondents - only in three of them the age diversity management system works properly. However, in the face of demographic changes, it will be necessary to skillfully manage heterogeneous groups, i.e. to move from a reactive to a proactive organization. One cannot forget that each generation is characterized by a different system of values, a different approach to life and work. Therefore, the managers should accurately recognize the age structure of employees, use their individual abilities so that they bring measurable benefits to the company. Moreover, it is the management of a single company who is expected to promote both diversity and equality, as well as the proper organization of time and workplace, as well as care for the atmosphere and mutual relations between different age generations. Therefore, the author of the article recommends the surveyed reactive companies to focus close attention, inter alia, on such issues as: defining workplaces by identifying the tasks performed

there, as well as psychophysical conditions (e.g., physical exertion, body position during work) and skills required for a given job (e.g. dexterity, knowledge of a foreign language). It is also worth taking into account aspects such as harmful factors, physical and mental load. This can then facilitate the proper selection of staff, considering their age, as well as the organization of replacements in the event of vacation or sickness absence. What is more, such a diagnosis also gives an overview of whether it is possible to organize joint work in a given workplace by, for example, two employees coming from different age group. It is also worth analyzing which workstations can be made more flexible. Thus, it refers to the introduction, if necessary, of the so-called flexible forms of employment (in the form of, inter alia, work for a specific period of time, part-time work, contract work or mandate contract) or flexible forms of working time (e.g. task-based working time, intermittent working time, shortened working time, or weekend work). Managers should also recognize the need for potential training to strengthen the potential of both the younger and older generations of employees.

In addition, the author of the article was interested in the issue of the culture of inclusion. Therefore, due to the questionnaire it was checked whether at least half of small and medium-sized enterprises implement such a culture by organizing mixed age teams. Unfortunately, in only 16 business entities such a state was identified, which made it impossible to accept the second research hypothesis. However, it should be noted that the age-diverse group is characterized by both strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, it becomes necessary for them to cooperate with each other to achieve the so-called synergy effect. "The main advantage of young people is up-to-date theoretical knowledge and the ability to use modern technologies. On the other hand, the main advantage of older people is experience and practical skills. The competences of young and old employees are complementary. Their cooperation generates added value that increases the effect of the entire team's work. In addition, such cooperation leads to the clash of different ideas and ideas, which results in an increase in creativity" (Jurek, 2012, p. 154). The above findings therefore become the basis for recommending to the owners of the surveyed companies to create teams of different ages, as far as possible and necessary. What's more, such teams are an opportunity to create intergenerational bonds. Therefore, a key role is assigned to company managers in creating effective communication based on, inter alia, openness to diversity, an appropriate form of communication, building understanding by discovering the needs, values, attitudes, and expectations of employees, and identifying the potential of staff (Cichorzewska et al., 2015, p. 750). Only in this way company management can create the conditions to fully exploit the opportunities and potential benefits of multigenerationality and minimize the risks resulting from it.

It is also worth emphasizing the role of succession of organizational knowledge for the efficient functioning of enterprises in the future. Łukasz Jurek aptly states that "extensive knowledge is not collected on paper or in an electronic version but is "in the minds" of employees who have created it while performing professional tasks. Therefore, the retirement of an employee means the loss of an extremely valuable resource, which is know-how, for the

company" (Jurek, 2012, p. 154). Therefore, to avoid this undesirable effect, it is also worth considering the implementation of mentoring or shadowing in companies. The first one involves providing supervision on a master-apprentice basis, where information is provided to younger employees during meetings and discussions. Shadowing, on the other hand, is about gaining knowledge through observation. i.e. the younger employee participates and observes the methods of operation of the senior employee, but - importantly - is only a passive participant in these activities. It is also possible to create conditions for the use of intermentoring, which is about sharing knowledge and experience by employees 50+ with employees of younger age or seniority, and training of older employees by younger employees, especially in the field of new technologies. This will not only enable the transfer of knowledge and experience necessary to carry out current activities but can also contribute to building good relationships in the work team.

The use of the above-mentioned methods of cooperation can also become a kind of remedy for the stereotypes about old age existing in the companies. As the research showed, as many as 78% of respondents 50+ experienced these unfavorable phrases. Most often they concerned too big individualism, lack of teamwork skills and low competences. Thus, third hypothesis was rejected. Therefore, company managers should also focus their attention on this negative aspect related to the employment of a diverse staff. In this area, it is recommended to organize regular meetings with employees to obtain information about harmful situations or to implement an anonymous survey. It is also worth considering the organization of integration meetings in order - as it results from nationwide research - to minimize the fear of old age, which is often a stimulus for a pejorative perception of the elderly, which has no basis in reality.

To sum up, the respondents' indications clearly justify the need to establish closer cooperation between employees from different age ranges. Therefore, the care of managers should be directed towards the systematic creation of an atmosphere of mutual trust, understanding, respect and tolerance for diversity. Cooperation and mutual assistance between representatives of different generations can lead to increase both motivation to perform professional duties and satisfaction. What's more, the feeling of accomplishment from work performed will have a positive impact on the effectiveness of activities. Therefore, taking diversity into account and its acceptance will enable the full use of employees' human capital, which will affect higher quantitative and qualitative results of work. Thus, it will be possible to strengthen the competitive position of enterprises on a micro scale, while on a macro scale, this state will significantly affect the extension of the professional activity of seniors on the labour market.

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