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*ЦЕНТЪР ПО ПУБЛИЧНА АДМИНИСТРАЦИЯ, НОВ БЪЛГАРСКИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ,
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**ПРОМЕНИ В РАВНИЩАТА НА ЗДРАВЕТО И БЕЗОПАСНОСТТА В
ОРГАНИЗАЦИИТЕ ПОРАДИ ГЪВКАВОСТ НА РАБОТНОТО МЯСТО ПРИ
ВЪЗРАСТНИТЕ ЖЕНИ В БЪЛГАРИЯ**

**CHANGES IN HEALTH AND SAFETY LEVELS WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS DUE TO THE
WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY OF OLDER WOMEN IN BULGARIA**

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Abstract: The proportion of older people within the Bulgarian population is increasing. Due to declining fertility and emigration waves in the 1990-ies, as well as the longer life expectancy, Bulgaria is facing one of the highest old-age-dependency ratios in the Europe. Eurostat data show that in 2060 the old-age-dependency ratio for the country will reach 63.54 and the average for the EU member states (EU 27) will be 53.47.

The paper focuses on a research conducted within the time period July-August 2006, under the name "The Use of the Potential of Workers Aged from 50 to 64 years". The research was used in the consequent two years to reveal some implications on the altering of the health and safety levels within the organizations due to the employment flexibility forms used for older women. The primary objective of the research was to examine the degree in which work potential of the older workers, aged 50-65, is used and to create an understanding which are the main flexible employment practices spread out for this age group. The secondary objective realized on a post-field stage was to determine how and in what direction these employment practices affect the health and safety levels within the organizations.

The research revealed the following major points:

- advantages and disadvantages of this group of employees, aged 50-65, as perceived by the respondents in connection to the age profile of the group;
- the recruitment and selection of older workforce;
- the usage of flexible employment practices – in general and for this specific group in particular;
 - the notion of flexible employees` qualities;
 - the human resource policies and practices used by the organizations in regard to older workers
 - the perception of future demographic changes and their impact on the HRM in the organization.

Key Words: Older Women, Health and Safety Levels, Flexible Employment Forms

1. INTRODUCTION

The proportion of older people within the Bulgarian population is increasing. Due to declining fertility, emigration waves in the 1990-ies, as well as the longer life expectancy. Although in the recent years there is a little improvement in fertility rates, Bulgaria is

facing one of the highest old-age-dependency ratios in the Europe (Eurostat projections, 2008). Eurostat data show that in 2050 the old-age-dependency ratio for the country will reach 63.54 and the average for the EU member states (27 countries) will be 53.47.

As the National Statistical Institute states the Bulgarian labour force is changing in composition, as a result of changes in both the composition of the population and the rates of labour force participation across demographic groups. The demographic changes, globalization in the world economy, as well as the EU integration perspectives pose increasing imperatives for labour force utilization on the Bulgarian labour market. In this regard the utilization of female human resources and especially of older women in the age group of 50-65 year-olds.

Most studies on older workers and retirement have largely ignored women, partly because the female share of the older paid work force has traditionally been small. Early retirement by men and increased labour force participation by women in their mid-fifties have expanded in proportion rapidly. As a result, it is no longer possible to ignore the labour force behaviour of women at the age 50 and over. In addition, there are several reasons to support this statement:

- the decrease in the Bulgarian labour force in general;
- the drastic decrease in the labour force participation of women with the increase of their age;
- the unused labour force (the rate of economic activity among older women is low – 40.7 % for the group for the 1st quarter of the year 2008).

The paper focuses on the positive implications which flexible labour forms have on the use of older women labour force and their influence on health and safety levels within organisations. The study comments only those forms of flexible employment that lead to better work conditions and better reconciliation of work and family life, e.g. flexible work schedules, part-time work on voluntary basis, telework, flexible work arrangements and tasks. The main aim is to describe the possible policies and strategies on enterprise level because

they are perceived as most suitable for specific human resources needs and most effective because of their direct influence in the decision of workers to stay in employment after the pension age.

The research is based on study conducted in the period July-August 2006 on a theme “The Use of the Potential of Workers Aged from 50 to 64 years”, which objective was to examine the degree in which work potential of the older workers, aged 50-65, is used and to create an understanding which are the main flexible employment practices spread out for this age group.

2. OLDER WOMEN LABOUR FORCE SUPPLY TENDENCIES

Since the 1st of January 2007 Bulgaria has become an EU member country. This is accompanied by the obligation for fulfilment of the European directives, guidelines and recommendations concerning equal opportunities: access to employment, career prospects, lifelong learning, education and improvement of working conditions.

As per to Article 2 of the Amsterdam Treaty, which specifies general equality provisions: “The Community shall... promote... a high level of employment and social protection, equality between men and women, the raising of the standard of living and quality of life, and economic and social cohesion and solidarity among Member States.”

Despite the fact that the country progresses in employment and health and safety area there are a lot of challenges in the sphere of improving the working conditions of older women and in attracting and retaining these group members in productive employment. As it becomes obvious from Table 1, the employment rates are similar and comparable for countries facing the same problems like Bulgaria. The differences between the employment rates for men and women

from the oldest in age employment group are averagely of 20 percents. They are the highest in value for Greece, Turkey and Slovenia, and much lower for United Kingdom, and Sweden. For Bulgaria, the difference in the

employment rates for men and women in general has been slowly decreasing for the recent several years, but the differences in employment between sexes in this group remain stable and hard to overcome.

Table 1-The Employment Rate of Women and Men between the age of 55 and 65 years country comparison for 2007

Countries	Female employment rate (% of population aged 55-64)	Male employment rate (% of population aged 55-64)
Bulgaria	34.5	51.8
Rumania	33.6	50.3
Slovenia	22.2	45.3
Poland	19.4	41.4
Croatia (2006)	25.7*	44.4*
United Kingdom	49.0	66.3
Greece	26.9	59.1
Turkey (2006)	16.7*	44.1*
Sweden	67.0	72.9
EU (25 countries)	36.1	54.1
EU (15 countries)	38.1	55.3

Source: Employment in Europe 2008, Statistical Annex 2, Key Employment Indicators

* For Croatia and Turkey the data are for the year 2006 due to the lack of statistical information

As it becomes obvious from the Table 2 for the first quarter of 2008 participation and employment rates of women and men in the group of 55-65 year-olds have substantial differences of nearly 20 percentage points. The unemployment rate of women (7.3 percentage points) is higher in comparison with that of men (5.8 percentage points). Only some 40 percent of women of that age are economically active (208.6 thousand) or in comparison with men for who almost

than a half of the population in this age (260.5 thousand) are in the labour force (Labour Force Survey – NSI, 2008). For the group of people of age older than 55, as it becomes clear from the table, the rates of economic activity and employment decrease substantially for the persons older than 66 years of age. This confirms the presence of a tendency for breaking the employment activity in the formal sector of the economy through the act of retiring.

Table 2 - Activity, Employment and Unemployment Rates of Population in the age group 55 years and over by Sex in Bulgaria

Indicators	Women -55-64 years of age	Women - 65 and over	Men - 55-64 years of age	Men - 65 and over
Activity rate	38.8	1.9	57.4	6.1
Employment rate	35.	1.8	53.9	5.9
Unemployment rate	7.3		5.8	

Source: National Statistical Institute, Labour Force Survey 1/2008, Sofia, 2008

The lower economic activity among women in comparison to men in this age group is due to the lower pension age (3 years earlier) and the minimal pension requirements settled in the Bulgarian Social Insurance Code. In addition women quit faster the labour market once they reach pension age. This is due to the Bulgarian traditions, greater difficulties in finding and retaining job in advanced age, family reasons (to take care of grandchildren and home duties). The relatively lower pay in comparison with younger and male family members has made older women contribution to the family incomes unessential. In addition, women earn only about 75% of men's gross monthly wages (Annual Review of Working Conditions in EU: 2004-2005).

Women with higher and upper secondary education are the most active labour force participants. Although the chances of becoming employed are bigger for well-educated women in this age group, the level of their employability is limited. They face serious difficulties in remaining in the labour force. Prove for this is their extremely lower activity rate. The reasons should be found in the fact that the share of well-educated older women is lower than the same for the younger age group. As younger and better educated generations are coming to the labour market the employment competition in Bulgaria worsens in periods of economic slowdown and in situations with limited job creation and depressed markets.

The better are the chances for employment of young workforce in a situation of a low demand of labour within the economy, the weaker is the demand of workforce at the age of 50 to 64, including the highly qualified part of it. Such example is given in a publication by Katya Vladimirova (Vladimirova, 1993: 25). During the first half of the 90-ies older women with higher technical education faced a

dramatic decrease in employment because there was no demand for their skills and knowledge. They were unable to get pension rights and the opportunities on the enterprise level for protection of their workplaces did not exist. This led to a long-term unemployment for these women as well as to a distress to them by leaving the labour market. The lower demand of older women's labour may be expected to reappear due to the deepening of the economic crisis in the country.

The changes in the future cohorts of women (which will flow into the age of 50 and over) will lead to increase in the labour market participation of this group. These individuals will be better educated compared to the present women in the older age groups and will have the characteristics of today professional and career women between the age of 30 and 45. In this context their future labour supply is crucial if the tendencies for emigration, as well as for a decrease in participation in the education system are remaining the same as they are today.

The employment conditions slowly improve at the beginning of the 21st century but the question remains: do they favour in the same extent the employment creation for prime age (35-45 years) and older women (55 and over). A study of employers' attitudes on hiring and retaining women made by the Centre for Women Research and Policy reveals some interesting findings. The employers' attitudes on the age of the women are not firmly discriminatory but they could easily be transformed into such under the suitable conditions (Glagicheva, Geleva, Detchev, 2004: 17). The reasons to stay employed are mostly financial for women. In addition, younger women are less motivated to work and behave actively on the labour market that may lead in decrease in future women participation rates.

In another research on employment discrimination is pointed out that age

influences much more on hiring of women than of men (Vladimirova, 2004: 62). This is far then fair, as women's wages in Bulgaria are used to compensate the low level of household incomes, especially when the husband is unemployed and the children are young.

To summarise the above, the Bulgarian labour market conditions favour predominantly employment of prime age women and men and this impedes the prospects for older women of getting or changing workplace with better one. Older women have to compete with well-educated and younger generations, who made them work under worse working conditions, lower pay and insecure labour contracts for shorter terms.

3. "THE USE OF THE POTENTIAL OF WORKERS AGED FROM 50 TO 64 YEARS" STUDY

In the period July- August 2006, a research on a theme "The Use of the Potential of Workers Aged from 50 to 64 years" was conducted. The objective was to examine the degree in which work potential of the older workers, aged 50-65, is used and to create an understanding which are the main flexible employment practices spread out for this age group.

The research was realized with the active assistance of the Bulgarian Human Resource Management and Development Association. Respondents were mainly members of the association who were asked to fill in questionnaires and return them by e-mail. The survey was fielded for a period of three weeks and three e-mail reminders were sent to members of the association in an effort to increase response rate.

Although the research has no gender dimension it is an attempt to find what are the perceptions of HR managers, professionals, CEOs and line managers for the recruitment, retention, motivation and development of older workers. This

is not an obstacle for the interpretation of findings in a gender context. Over 60 percent of respondents belonged to the service sector. As it is often highlighted in the Bulgarian research publications women are concentrated in this sector mainly.

The research had revealed the following major points:

- advantages and disadvantages of this group of employees, as perceived by the respondents in connection to the age profile of the group;
- the recruitment and selection of older workforce;
- the usage of flexible employment practices – in general and for this specific group in particular;
- the notion of flexible employees' qualities;
- the human resource policies and practices used by the organizations in regard to older workers
- the perception of future demographic changes and their impact on the HRM in the organization.

Some 67 percent of respondents were women and only 33 were men, which reflect the fact that HR professionals are predominantly females. On the question: "At what age someone could be considered as older worker?" 37 percent of respondents pointed that this is 55, and 33 percent indicated the age of over 50. The results show that the age at which someone is considered as older worker remains relatively higher and for 70 percents of the respondents it means an age of 50 or older.

The research reveals that employers and HR professionals want to use in larger extent five types of workplace flexibility for older workers: (i) flexible working time, (ii) temporary and (iii) part-time contracts, (iv) shift and (v) seasonal work. It is not surprising that the respondents are highlighting the importance of flexible working schedule because it is the most widespread form of flexibility used in the Bulgarian

economy by now especially in the private sector.

The most important reason for hiring older workers is the lack of potential employees with the needed qualification (25%). This could force employers and HR professionals to seek for employees with the relevant qualification in the older age groups. The second reason is that sometimes a part of the labour force is perceived not to possess certain qualities associated with older employees. (20%) The third argument is the desire to transfer knowledge and experience to younger in order to make the organization more competitive (17%). These reasons are particularly important in declining industries and in some professions in which accumulation of human capital rises with the age and in fast growing industries where the concentration of young employees is so great and sometime a request of longer experience is obvious.

Do the employers have intentions to create greater flexibility in the workplaces? Which are the main qualities of flexible employees? The respondents think that employees are not independent enough to be offered chances for flexible employment. They also think that the employees are not interested in greater flexibility and the result of flexible work practices is a team fragmentation.

Human resources professionals pointed out that the most important qualities of the flexible workers for them are – ability to organize their priorities, 25 % pointed out this quality as most important one) and independency (24 %).

The readiness to take concrete actions for implementing of human resources retaining policies for the age group of 50-64 years of age is comparatively low. The managers declare mainly their desire in a situation of an increase of the share of this very same age group to take up measures in the field of transfer of the acquired

experience (24%), as well as to implement practices for planning of continuity (20%).

With a smaller frequency are presented the more active strategy of repeated employment after retirement (17%) and of implementing of changes in the jobs, of usage of shared jobs and teleworking (11%). This shows out that retirement continues to be regarded as an event leading to an economic inactivity.

In support to the above presented views, a very small percentage of the employers declare that they would decrease the labour intensity (4%) and would apply economic measures for improving the work environment (4%), which in a situation of increasing the average age of the workforce have in no doubt a certain place of importance and play a significant role.

4. CHANGES IN HEALTH AND SAFETY LEVELS OF OLDER WOMEN IN BULGARIA

With increase of age, keeping of a good health status becomes a key factor for sustaining of working capability and desire for work activity. Even a temporary deterioration of the health status may lead to a decision by the women of the oldest employment group to quit their jobs, if the employer has not provided the necessary support and has not contributed for the improvement of the labour conditions and the work environment.

As a principle, with the process of aging, a part of health characteristics (eyesight, hearing, change in time for reaction and the motive abilities, intensity of concentration) may deteriorate. Despite that for a great part of women of 50 to 64 years of age, significant changes in the health status may not occur, the risks for it deterioration due to the poor conditions of work at the work place and non-compliance with the requirements for health and safety labour remain high.

The data for the spread of occupational accidents show out that the persons who are most vulnerable to occupational accidents are at the age of 45 to 54 years of age and have a work experience of 20 to 30 years (Strategy for safety and health at work, 2008: 19).

The number of occupational accidents is stable and high and the number of pensions rendered for handicaps increases in the structure of the provided pensions. Within the time period 1990-2005, some 2 289 Bulgarian employees died in occupational accidents, and some 1 523 remain permanently handicapped (Chengelova). In this very same period, some 17 300 cases of professional diseases were registered. The share of women working on a part-time basis is limited. In same time, for the full-time employed women, who comprise 90 percent of the women's share, the continuity of working day is high. Every fourth woman and every third man in Bulgaria work from 45 to 60 hours per week. Every 15th man and every 37th woman work over 60 hours per week (Chengelova).

The spread of occupational accidents by sex shows out a smaller number of the occupational accidents for women than for men, which is due to the specific distribution of older women to the miscellaneous economic sectors. This distribution is comparable with that of prime age group, but employment of older women increases in sectors which offer greater employment insecurity and worse working conditions (i.e. agriculture, manufacturing, trade and etc).

Women, at the age of 50 and over, work mainly in service sector, predominantly in education, health and care, trade and the public administration. Their employment share in industry is also high. It could be asserted that the number of women working in the agricultural sector is underestimated because of the high

degree of work in the household, as unpaid family workers and for the production of goods for the final use by the household. Women work more often with a computer and are twice more concentrated in the service sectors than men.

The lower frequency of occupational accidents and professional diseases of women does not mean that this group does not need adequate and favourable working conditions, which should comply with its specifics. The greatest effectiveness have the measures which are taken at a level of a single organization for attracting and retaining of women from the oldest age group. They should reflect the perceptions of the older women for their work within the organization, which implies significant influence on their decision to continue working.

5. STRATEGIES FOR COMBINING FLEXIBLE EMPLOYMENT FORMS WITH HEALTHY AND SAFE WORKING CONDITIONS

To solve the problem of low activity and employment rates of older women is required simultaneous implementation of complementary strategies. For example the retention and attraction of the women in the age bracket 50-65 will be more effective if the introduction of flexible employment forms is accompanied by improvement of health and safety conditions at work. The solving of the problem with the low economic activity and employment of women from the oldest age group requires the simultaneous implementation of supplementary strategies. For example, the retaining and attracting of older women may be more effective, if the introduction of flexible employment forms are supplemented with improvement of safe and healthy working conditions.

The interaction of the strategies is in two directions. From one side, the healthy and safe working conditions

influence on the preserving of the working capability of the women from the oldest age group, as well as for the prolonging of the period of their economic activity. From the other side, the flexible employment forms are means for diminishing the intensity and for individualization of the speed of work, as well as for decreasing the stress connected with necessity of combining of private and professional life, for lowering the fatigue and the impact of the unfavorable work environment on human organism.

The positive results for the joint implementation of both strategies are connected with a decrease in the costs of absenteeism due to professional diseases or from occupational accidents. They lead to a decrease also in the costs of personnel turnover, to improvement of both work motivation and the organization image as a good employer, which provides a good quality of employment to its personnel.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Some important conclusions in connection to the survey results could be made. Age is not a good predictor of who can perform a job successfully. Key, however, is having skills, knowledge, and ability to learn. This means staying current with skills that are valuable on the open labour market.

Two obstacles create an on-going challenge for older women workers: limited employer-provided training for older workers and age discrimination based on well-entrenched views, assumptions, and stereotypes of older workers.

The reasons for which the employees prefer to retire are the accumulated fatigue and exhaustion from work, the desire for a greater control on leisure time and the family duties, including the cares for dependent family members. The creation of flexible workplaces sometimes does not involve some

specific measures and schemes but depends on the good will of the line manager and the job redesign. Possible flexible employment practices that have proved to be effective in many countries are: teleworking; compressed workweek; reduced workload; job sharing; flexible working hours; part-time working and etc.

Important preconditions for the wider spread of the high quality flexible employment forms suitable for older working women are the changes in the attitudes of the employers, the introduction of hourly wages, the changes in the model of economy for a more intensive usage of the workforce at age over than 50 years, the decrease in extra work and the carrying out campaigns for popularization of the positive forms of flexible employment used for increasing the economic activity of population.

Implementation of miscellaneous forms of flexible employment is an issue related more or less to the organizational culture. When the values within the organization and the firm's policy suppose the existence of a greater freedom in the choice and the fulfilment of carried out work tasks, than the importance of flexible employment forms rises.

The bigger organisations need a policy statement that supports fully workplace flexibility initiatives and the equal access to them. The managers have to understand that every single employee has specific needs in order to combine work with family life and those women the age of 55 and over also have specific requirements to their work.

Flexibility in the workplace can provide a way to manage older women, time, space, and workload more effectively, efficiently, and responsively. There are many business reasons to create more flexible and supportive work environment: to attract and retain talented women; to raise moral and increase job satisfaction; to increase

productivity and improve business results; make people more committed and etc.

The generation in Bulgaria to which older women belong has strong work ethics and is able to work as good as the young employees. It is not less productive or less adaptable to changes when the right mix of approaches and policies are used. Achieving gender equality also requires major improvements in the nature of the jobs and the conditions of work which all women do, if they are not simply to be stuck in 'bad jobs' with poor prospects for progression.

It is therefore vital that, within organisations, preconditions for professional development are to be created, through good work design, training, skill enhancement, through employee development strategies, and through woman-friendly working time arrangements. Thus, the effective seek for equal opportunities depends both on improving the employment practices of individual organisations in relation to their female staff and on effective changes in the wide frames of the labour market.

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