

What has to be done

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What if Work were the Key?

Work definitely is the key to the dramatic development in East Germany and to deal with a situation unique in Europe.

In my presentation I will point out the substantial changes in East Germany since 1989, our reaction to demography and a work culture based on unemployment, post-socialism, plethora of applicants, low wages, broken careers and early retirement.

A peaceful revolution

In 1989 the peaceful revolution made the Berlin Wall disappear and lead to the reunification of East and West Germany as well as to a substantial change in Middle and Eastern Europe. What has happened since then to the economy and to millions of jobs?

After the reunification: a real challenge

In 1995 only 30,000 from formerly 180,000 jobs existed in the pharmaceutical and chemical industry in East Germany. All other workers were laid off or treated with government-funded plans like "Kurzarbeit Null" ("short time work zero") or "Frührente" (early retirement). Millions of people tried to find a new job, millions of skilled, talented and perfectly trained workers left East Germany. Almost 75% of all plants, enterprises and production sites were closed and demolished.

Trade and co-production contracts to companies in other former socialist states broke up. The Treuhandanstalt (Trust Agency) privatized as many companies as possible, reducing their staff dramatically. Respecting seniority, obligations to support (children, spouses...) and age, we formed an age-homogeneous workforce between 40 and 50 years. Beginning with 2012 almost the complete staff retired within a time span of ten years. Most businesses and public administration shared this problem.

Difficult?

Even worse: in 1989 a never seen before crash cut the birth rate in the GDR by half. Many families moved away. 25 years after the reunification the labour market is supposed to replace most of the East German staff leaving the companies for retirement. The market is empty and has swapped over from "too much" to "not enough". Until 2030 East Germany will miss up to 30% of all prospective workers. This cannot be compensated just by raising efficiency and productivity.

"What has to be done?" (Lenin)

We know that:

- there is no quick and easy panacea to the demographic challenge,
- there is no time for more research and trial-and-error,

- there are not enough skilled people available to maintain the existing systems of production, administration, trade, education, health...
- there is no gain in reducing working hours,
- raising the percentage of women workers won't solve the problem: 32% of all workers (even in production lines and in shift work) are women,
- raising vocational training won't help: 6% of all workers are apprentices, we face a stiff competition for apprentices and don't anything for education and training,
- qualifying unemployed people won't help: there are no more qualifiable people,
- employing migrants will fail due to East Germany's well earned bad reputation as a xenophobic region, remember the PEGIDA-protesters in Dresden?

Thus we need to take all thinkable, possible, reasonable, innovative measures right now and at once to maintain a longer, healthier, more qualified, motivated working life.

Our goal "Keeping people at work for a longer work life –qualified, healthy and motivated" – is the opposite of the last thirty years working culture of early retirement, golden handshakes, denial of skill enhancement to older workers and creating an atmosphere that makes all people who intended to work longer appear as incurable dimwits.

Work culture is pervasive. People have planned their lives according to it and insist on being treated exactly like their predecessors.

We are the first movers and we try hard

Talking to workers of more working hours, a longer working life, more training and qualification, health care... is difficult. We did it. In 2011 we signed a completely innovative collective bargaining agreement –"Lebensphasenorientierte Arbeitszeitgestaltung" – ("Designing working hours according to phases of life") providing benefits for –individual!– workers or groups of workers:

- 2,5 hours per week for childcare or eldercare
- Reduced working hours for groups of workers with special strains and liabilities
- Age-based working hours – with the chance to continuously reduce working hours after the age of 60

Until September 2015 we want to expand this collective bargaining agreement with

- measures for maintaining or enhancing the individual health;
- training programs to improve employability;
- leadership qualification;
- more flexibility for shift workers, restoring shift workers' autonomy.

There are huge stumbling blocks on our way.

Workers don't like what we do.

Managers don't like what we do.

We need to do what we do and we will continue. Please accompany us with your expertise and interest.