

Intermediate Report for the DIJ project
„Aging Population, Knowledge Spill-Over and Civil Society“
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1. Results from the Evaluation of the Questionnaire

Of 864 questionnaires sent out to civil society organisations, we received 34 answers (response rate 4%). 61% of respondents had observed, within their circle of acquaintances, a person's move from enterprises into civil society (but not in the opposite direction). A further 19% also reported transfers from civil society into enterprises and vice versa, and 3% knew someone who moved from the civil society into the economic sphere. This transfer is almost unanimously (by 90% of respondents) regarded as accompanied by a transfer of knowledge. Opinions are somewhat split, however, about the driving forces behind this process: while 45% argue that it is primarily civil society that “draws in” people with experience in economic enterprises, another 26% either thought that the enterprises took the initiative, or they did not specify one direction. Interestingly enough, a clear majority of respondents (61%) answered that the beneficiaries of the process included both enterprises and the civil society, rather than just one of these groups. On the other hand, 19% of respondents also perceived some disadvantages related to the transfer of knowledge.

2. Results from Interviews

We held five in-depth interviews with representatives of NPOs. The results of these interviews are arranged here by their relevance for different groups of actors. In accordance with the position of the interview partners – four of them were already retired – the comments made about NPOs and about the individual circumstances of pensioners are from within, while those about other actors are made from the outside.

Individual level

Although surveys show that hobbies and social activities take up the largest share of the newly freed time enjoyed by pensioners, well ahead of voluntary engagement, our interview partners stressed other activities. Many of their friends and acquaintances are

keen on doing “something useful” and meritorious after their retirement. In some cases this can be a part-time position in their previous company, for example in limited projects, or as a coach. Others move as part-time lecturers to universities. Voluntary engagement in an NPO is regarded as comparable to these post-career options as a useful, albeit unpaid, work. An important factor for pensioners is the flexibility to adapt the amount of time spent on these activities according to one’s circumstances, for example reducing it to several hours per week. By far most of the pensioners mentioned in the interviews appeared to be rather highly qualified experts, thus explaining the divergence from general survey results.

Pensioners of this kind can, if they want to take up a new, useful and respected work, offer a great deal in return: not only the knowledge and skills gained in their previous position, but also contacts from that positions as well as considerable temporal flexibility.

NPOs

Among the major needs of NPOs are apparently skills such as project organisation, accounting, and successful dealing with business contacts and bureaucrats. Of course, less qualified helpers and financial support are also always in demand, but in terms of skills and knowledge, management skills are clearly most sought-after. Depending on the NPO’s field of activity, the mechanical and technical skills of retired engineers and craftsmen are also appreciated.

By contrast, technological skills and the use of new technologies in particular seem to play a lesser role. While “technical understanding” in the sense of a general familiarity with technology and machines are often mentioned, NPOs do not usually seek computer experts. What they look for in new members, even if they do require computer skills, are usually only basic skills such as using e-mail or at most the ability to update a homepage after some training. These activities are not so specialised that pensioners from enterprises would have skills that housewives or students lack.

These results contradict our original hypothesis, which assumed that pensioners would be useful for NPOs because they offer more and other skills than the other main source groups for volunteers.

However, there are two distinct benefits in employing pensioners for such

voluntary work:

First, older volunteers can use their personal networks that they built up during many years in business life for the benefit of the NPO. Second, they have sufficient time and flexibility to ensure a certain stability and continuity in the activities of the NPO. Due to study and exams or to work-related strains, younger people often have to put their NPO responsibilities on hold, while pensioners can often more easily adjust their schedule to the needs of the NPO.

Enterprises

Representatives of NPOs make quite different statements about the efforts made by enterprises to support civil society activities of their pensioners. On the one hand, they assume that companies have a strong feeling of responsibility for former employees. This would be expressed in the support of such group activities. Saving former employees from old age depression might have the additional effect of gratitude and relatedness to the company. On the other hand, some NPO representatives complain that projects directed at younger or active pensioners are rarely promoted, in contrast to care or entertainment projects for the infirm elderly.

The examples mentioned in the interviews confirmed our assumption that companies have an interest in retaining highly qualified employees even after their retirement for part time assignments (thus reducing their spare time available for voluntary activities). Present employees apparently have almost no opportunity to take part in voluntary activities with the approval and support of their company. Although some programmes exist that would offer employees a sabbatical for such activities, few people dare to take this offer, fearing (and perhaps rightly so) that this would endanger at least their career path if not their employment itself. The option of moving from civil society into enterprises is apparently also quite rare, except for students who are active in NPOs. As graduates, they become relatively attractive to companies since they have already acquired skills in the NPO that they would otherwise have to learn in the company. Whether they have acquired any other qualifications during the voluntary work does not seem to be a factor in the recruitment.

This means that support for civil society initiatives can only lead to indirect

advantages for the enterprises in the sense that support for NPOs improves societal conditions and ultimately benefits the companies.

Government

As our intention was to research the interaction between enterprises and civil society we had excluded government agencies from our original concept. Especially communal governments are often mentioned as partners of NPOs. Apparently, they are more directly affected by the effects of an ageing society, and thus see a greater need for action than the enterprises. However, the focus of all government initiatives appears to be on care rather than active ageing, i.e. on promoting NPOs *for* but not necessarily *by* senior citizens.

3. Conclusion

Our respondents perceive the “ageing society” (*kōreika shakai*) quite clearly as a problem or challenge. In particular, this assessment is visible in the frequent references to the so-called “2007 problem:” from 2007 onwards, a great number of people born in the baby boom years will reach retirement age. In contrast to previous generations of retirees, they are relatively healthy and fit. Many of them could remain active, and many wish to do so. The motivation for an active retirement life is apparently related to the previous employment and to the skills acquired there, as it is these skills that would then lie idle. Companies are obviously interested in retaining the most important people with key skills, who are presumably at the same time those with the highest motivation. They do not make claims on the time of other pensioners, and it appears that they usually do not promote their active voluntary participation in society either.

A Digital Divide between civil society and enterprises exists, but NPOs rarely realise and discuss the gap in technical knowledge and skills. Most NPOs avoid technological difficulties by keeping most of their day-to-day work on a relatively low technological level. Technically more demanding tasks are carried out only occasionally when someone is available who has the necessary skills.