

Age Management in Poland

— science fiction or reality?

POPULATION AGING IS CLEARLY A MAJOR FACTOR WHICH WILL INFLUENCE THE LABOR MARKET IN THE NEAR FUTURE. MEANWHILE, POLES AREN'T READY TO FACE THE CHALLENGES WHICH COME WITH A HIGHER EMPLOYMENT AGE. IF WE DON'T START MANAGING AGE ACTIVELY, OUR ECONOMY MAY HAVE A PROBLEM

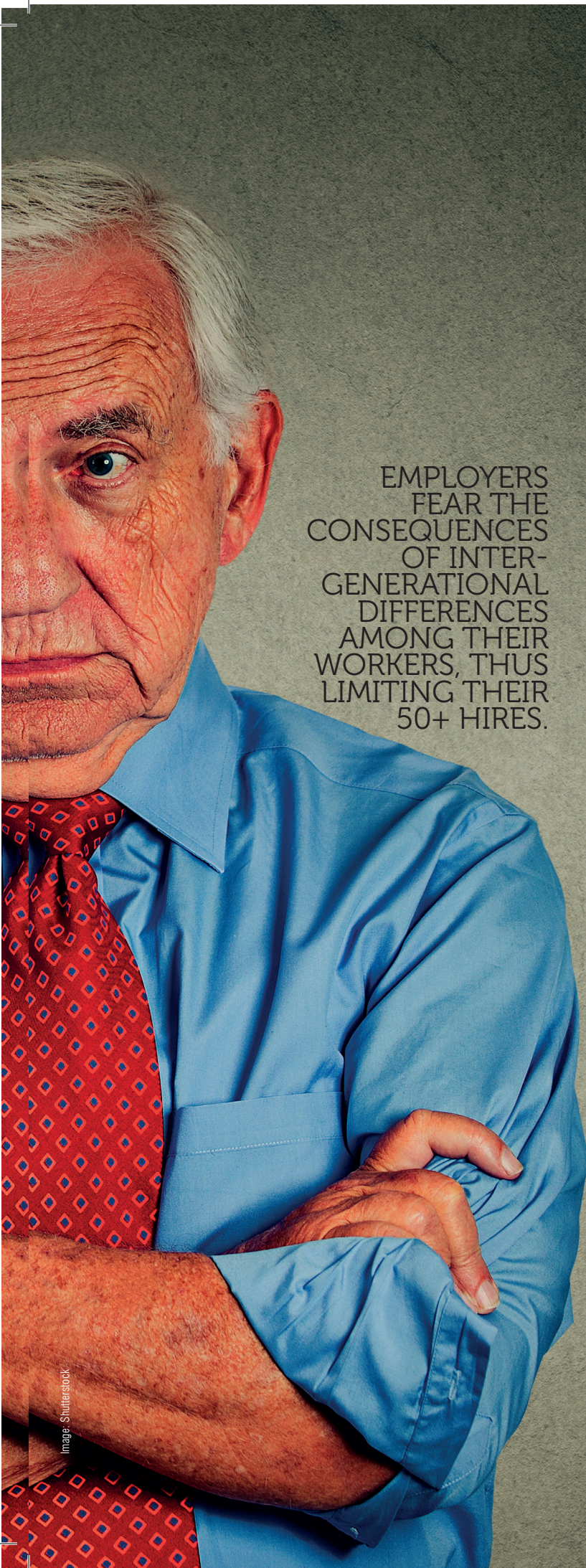
BY SERGIUSZ PROKURAT

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aging of European societies is a fact. Research, statistics and observations all confirm this. An increasing number of companies are also observing this phenomenon in their organizations and have started pondering how to cope with and take advantage of the growing average age of their workforce. A smaller labor pool, due to the demographic situation, will in time mean a significant shortage of workers. It will also be a challenge for countries' pension systems. Awareness about these threats has gradually led political decision-makers to take interest in the labor activity of workers in various age brackets and is shaping the direction of labor policy. In companies, the answer to aging may be age management. Dirk van Dierendoch, co-author of the report "Inclusive Human Resources Practices for Older Workers – iHRM" said that if due to better healthcare we live longer, we have no choice – we have to work longer and make sure all workers are as productive as possible. Also those with the most experience.

Age management is an increasingly popular topic in Poland. It isn't, as the name would suggest, a separate subject or specialization within management. It is a very specific approach to managing a team with very diverse ages. An employer tries to maintain age diversity among his workers and use this to the advantage of employees and the company. In other words, by the smart use of available instruments of human resource management, the employer tracks advantages stemming from an age-diverse work team. The unprecedented nature of this approach is based on the





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fact that most employers fear the consequences of inter-generational differences among their workers, thus limiting their 50+ hires, while in many firms, age differences are the reason for conflict.

In line with the diagnosis of the Labour and Social Policy Ministry, the demographic processes taking place in Poland will result in there being less people in the productive age. In the not-so-distant future, companies may feel the pain of finding workers, with the greatest labor reserves to be found in the senior age group. Are Polish companies ready for this?

The report "Inclusive Human Resources Practices for Older Workers – iHRM," which included several European countries, dispels any illusions. There is not much awareness about the need for age management in Poland. The report explains this in the following way: "The answers to questions regarding older workers policies were: 'I do not know anything about this' or 'It is difficult to say, it is not something that is practiced in our company.'" It seems that companies are not focusing on the aging problem and perhaps it has something to do with equal rights for employees. Polish firms do not age manage. Many HR specialists are unaware of the principles of such an approach and only refer to the initiatives directed at middle-aged employees. HR activities in companies are the same for all team members. There is a lack of awareness regarding the non-discrimination clause not necessarily leading to equal treatment of all workers. "Older workers often stay at companies for long-term employment, while younger employees move around more often. This can also be seen in the applications for positions. Often, younger workers seem to be preferred potential employees: 'if we have a vacancy, our boss prefers to recruit young people,'" we read in the report.

In the EU, older workers are especially prized due to their experience and knowledge about the industry and specific conditions of the work at hand. Companies strive to create advantageous and motivating work environments. "Being 50 years old you still have a long way to go!" said van Dierendoch. In the last decade or so, the world has seen a couple of new approaches to age management, guaranteeing success while upholding standards. Here we can mention the European Code of Good Practice. In Poland, we can build on foreign experience, where the specific and difficult art of age structuring has already been mastered.

Examples of positive actions include: additional paid vacation for educational purposes; mentoring carried out by older workers for the benefit of their younger colleagues and vice versa (in the latter case this often takes the form of inter-mentoring); adjusting training methods to worker age (e.g. subtitles in training videos for the hearing-impaired), monitoring the development of workers' skills and offering individual development paths; counseling and support by career development, informing/remind-



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ing workers via the intranet about prophylactic medical tests; special rest/relaxation sessions (in a spa); eliminating tough physical work (e.g. carrying heavy loads) by bringing together younger and older workers and encouraging a healthy lifestyle. The question is, are Polish employers able to foot the bill? And are they ready for changes in management methods?

Currently, Poland has one of the lowest labor rates at the 50+ age range in the entire European Union. Labor participation at 50+ in 2012 was, according to GUS, 31.5 percent, with men at 40.4 percent and women only 24.6 percent. As a comparison, the average labor participation for people aged 25-64 in Poland in 2012 was 77.2 percent, with women standing at 71.4 percent. This means that as many as 9 million people from the 50+ age group do not have stable and legal employment, and their potential, knowledge and

skills are not leveraged by the economy and society. Strongly ingrained stereotypes about workers in various age groups persist, based on which employers undertake very schematic action. There is also a permeating opinion that older workers are an obstacle to hiring younger colleagues.

In Poland, an inclusive HR climate is missing compared to the EU countries. "This country has the greatest opportunity for improvement among all we studied," van Dierendoch added. The aging of societies means that the participation of older people will increase year-on-year. Currently, about one in six Poles is over 60 and in 30 years, one third of the country will be included in this age group. Also the so-called labor pool will age, which means that employers will have to deal with increasingly older workers. For now, they can choose young people, but in a decade they won't have this option.