Pre Retirement Courses

A shortcut to active ageing
- and the best answer to the demographic challenge in EU

To be what we are, and to become what we are capable of becoming, is the only end of life.

Robert Louis Stevenson

Retirement - a most difficult transition in life.
To retire from working life is one of the most difficult changes and transitions in life. Many people do not think that leaving the working week behind them and getting ultimate freedom will be a problem. In addition, there is a general lack of public awareness of all the radical changes retirees will have to go through in the process of retirement.

However, a survey among retired persons in the USA showed that of all the major changes and transitions in a life time such as getting married, having children, children leaving the home etc.– a majority of 41% found retirement the most difficult.

Furthermore, retirement is not just a standard process. When and how to retire may vary from one human being to another. Retirement age may be as individual and varying as body age. And ways of retirement may be as flexible as careers before retirement. Consequently it is neede to qualify seniors for making an appropriate decision: on when and how to retire, and in a way not just following fixed retirement ages or standard retirement patterns.

Just as most other transitions of a lifetime, the proces of retirement may be considered and decided upon. Not only for one’s own welfare, but for the needs of society as well. Retirement patterns happens to make contributions to the state of economies and welfare of all EU member states.

Deliberate individual choice by seniors on retirement age may increase average retirement age in EU to the benefit of both active seniors not ready for leaving the labour market and European communities under threat by demographic developments.

When confronting important changes in life, many people have found that good counselling and coaching can be a lifeline. This help can shorten the period where difficulties and worries can overshadow the new beginnings and possibilities at the end of the tunnel. It is also interesting to notice that, when you
enter the labour market, there are many good counselling opportunities that you can easily access. But when you leave the labour market and confront the most difficult change in life, there is nothing! - except maybe some advice on financial issues from a bank or pension fund. But after the last day on the full-time job, there is often a screaming silence concerning counselling on the most important issue in life.

**Pre-retirement course - a shortcut to improve quality of life in third age**

Pre-retirement courses are a rather new concept, providing counselling and coaching for seniors entering the difficult process of transition into retirement. During the last 10-15 years a variety of different courses addressing different target groups among senior workers and senior citizens from 50-80 years have flourished. Most of this advancement is in the highly developed parts of the world: USA, Canada, EU, Japan and Australia.

The **objectives of the pre-retirement courses** are, that every senior participant will:

- Be more conscious of their own strengths and competencies, and continually develop and use them as long as possible.
- Be better prepared to find his or her own goals and ways, both in the last part of their professional career on the job and in the years beyond.
- Be able to see through traditional images and stereotypes on ageing and retirement and not to let their new life be predicted by outdated prejudices.
- Be able to create his or her own tailor-made way to a meaningful and fulfilling life in the third age.

The pre-retirement courses first of all will be for **the benefit of the seniors** themselves. For many seniors a pre-retirement course is a shortcut to a better quality of life in active ageing. See later - the impressive high numbers of 'very satisfied' responses in written evaluations from seniors, who have participated in a pre-retirement course.

But most interestingly, these evaluations also show that pre-retirement courses also are for **the benefit of the society**. In fact, it is tempting, and not at all irrelevant to claim, that pre-retirement courses might be one of the best answers to the demographic challenge facing all EU member states.

**Better quality of life in active ageing**

Seniors are, first of all, characterized by being different in several important ways. As they grow older, people differ more and more from each other, partly because of different genes, partly related to different working and living condi-
tions, and, surprisingly, also because of different feelings of and attitudes to the ageing process. We are born like copies, but we die as originals. These increasing differences during the life span also means, that seniors choose a diversity of different ways in the transition into retirement.

To find a tailor made way to your own senior career needs replacing the junior career in the decade from 50-60 years. Almost all seniors need to have a critical look at negative images of ageing and stereotypes on retirement, and replace them with more authentic and empowering images. Our culture in television, movies, greeting cards and even in the workplaces, exerts a strong mental and emotional influence over us with its negative messages about ageing. The virtues of youth are unfortunately, constantly reinforced.

It can be difficult to overcome such images and change. But what if ageing doesn't mean what you might have thought it did? What if ageing is a social construction and growing older is largely up to one self? A pre-retirement course with counselling and the collective support of other seniors committed to finding new ways, can make it easier to overcome the challenges of age stereotypes and also achieve active ageing more quickly.

Active Ageing is, in the definition of the W.H.O., ‘the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age’. Active ageing allows people to realize their potential for physical, social, and mental well-being throughout the course of life and to participate in society. Active ageing aims to extend healthy life expectancy and quality of life for all people as they age.

In a European context, Active Ageing is recognized as a concept developed by the European Commission in 2002. A concept with more emphasis on the idea of longer activity, with a higher retirement age and working practices adapted to the age of the employee.

A pre-retirement course addresses counselling to the aims of Active Ageing both in the definition of the W.H.O. and of the European Commission. However, evaluations from pre-retirement courses show that after the courses, seniors change their plans and get inspiration to ‘realize their potential for physical, social, and mental well-being throughout the life course and to participate in society’ - as described in the W.H.O. definition. A pre-retirement course is, in fact, a shortcut to active ageing.

**Pre-retirement courses - best answer to the demographic challenge**

The demographic development in EU, with more older and fewer younger people, creates a lot of different challenges in all EU member states - both in a short and a long term perspective. To cope with these demographic challenges in a proactive way the European Commission has taken many initiatives. This
can be shortly expressed in the strategy: Empowering older people to age in good health and to contribute more actively to the labour market and to their communities.

Though the demographic challenges are surprisingly different from one member state to another, all member states in one way or another tries to implement the recommendations on active ageing from the European Commission:

- To promote active ageing in employment
- To promote active ageing in the community through volunteering and caring
- To promote healthy ageing and independent living

If the implementation of this strategy is going to succeed or not - it all depends on the decision makers. In this case the decision makers, are of course, the senior workers, the senior citizens and the senior retirees. In the end, every single senior has to decide if he or she is going to: prolong their working life, contribute in voluntary work or have a more healthy lifestyle. So it is obvious - that the essential first step in implementing the EU strategy on solving the demographic challenge will be to get in contact with the decision makers and have a dialog on their future plans. A pre-retirement course is the evident platform for such a dialogue.

**The content of a pre-retirement course**

As described above, it is not the objectives of a pre-retirement course to persuade seniors following the course to stay longer on the job nor to be involved in cultural or social activities in the local communities. A dialog with the decisions makers takes place in the sense expressed by Robert L. Stevenson: 'To be what we are, and to become what we are capable of becoming, is the only end of life'.

**The overall purpose** of a course for people around 60 years considering the transition from the early career into the senior career – is to assist and guide the participants to find their very own answers on the following questions:

- Who am I – now?
- What do I want?
- How do I get there?
- How do I sustain it – and give back?

Depending on individual differences among seniors and differences in national conditions – some seniors decide to stay longer in the job, others quit the job and use their bonus hours in personal and family activities, while many join volunteer organisations and so on.
But all – or almost all seniors – are eagerly searching to find meaning, purpose and passion in the senior career – whatever it might be.

To assist seniors in finding a way to meaning and purpose in the senior career – a Pre-Retirement Course where you can discuss new possibilities with other seniors and get inspiration from teachers – is a very good offer. An offer all seniors should have the opportunity to attend – no matter if it’s before or after retirement.

A pre-retirement course developed and implemented with great success in Aarhus, Denmark focus on the following themes:

- **Kick your old stereotypes on retirement**
  It’s difficult for many seniors to find their own senior career, before they have kicked out traditional images of retirement. A good start is to identify and discuss such old-fashioned images – breaking down mental barriers before planning your own way.

- **Identify your core competencies**
  The best stepstones on the way to your senior career is to identify examples of ‘what you did when you were best’ from your whole life. As a senior you now know who you have become, and what you want and that you can do it. Then go for it – and find out how to get there.

- **Purpose and passion – with or without - a paycheck**
  Find a passion and you will never retire from that – sounds more easy than it is. During the final exercises it’s important to emphasize, that at this moment of history it is mostly a DIY (doing-it-yourself) job for the new generations of seniors to find their new ways to meaning and purpose. Either in paid or unpaid activities – where you can find a purpose and meaning bigger than your self.

The final important conclusion is based on a post evaluation by 92 participants at five pre-retirement course held in spring 2011 in Aarhus, Denmark. When seniors, through intense dialogs with other committed seniors, become more conscious of their own strengths, and are able to see through stereotyped imprints and images of retirement and create new ways to a meaningful and fulfilling life in third age - a majority of seniors following the courses change plans and decide a life in active ageing.

The results from the post evaluation by 92 participants showed that:

- 38 % decided - to stay longer on the job
- 44 % decided – to become volunteers
• 39 % decided - to improve their health habits
• 53 % decided - to improve their network

The results demonstrates very clearly, that it is not irrelevant to claim, that **pre-retirement courses are a shortcut to active ageing and the best answer to the demographic challenges in EU.**

Concern for health and working conditions in working places makes later retirement possible, but counselling on retirement makes it happen.

Furthermore, the results demonstrates that courses motivate seniors for active ageing in employment and in the community through volunteering & caring as well as healthy ageing and independent living.

Courses for pre retirement counselling may make it obvious and clear to people and to politicians in all EU countries, that there certainly are alternatives to traditional retirement patterns. Such alternatives may not only benefit European communities. They may provide seniors with a happier life without losing personal competencies, social networks and feeling of importance because of retirement.

**The ultimate dream: Pre-retirement courses - compulsory in EU.**
There is no doubt that the current generation of 60 to 80 year-olds are the healthiest and the most well educated ever in history. If we do not become better to develop and to use the competencies and the resources of these groups of seniors, we might experience the greatest loss of resources and competencies ever in history.

Pre-retirement courses are not seen as an overall answer to the demographic challenges or to improve active ageing. But dialogs with the primary decision makers – the seniors themselves - is a first important step. The evaluations and results of recent courses held in Aarhus are indeed very promising. To make pre-retirement courses compulsory in EU is the ultimate goal. The first step in realizing the dream could be initiated at EU level – hopefully, in conjunction with the European Year of Active Ageing in 2012.

Poul-Erik Tindbæk, PhD
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*nb: Attached below – an evaluation of five pre-retirement courses, Aarhus,DK.*
Evaluation - five groups SeniorForce - Spring 2011

92 participants in total = 23 men and 69 women
55 - 67 years - average 60.5 yr

Did you enjoy the course

Change of plans for the future

stay longer - on job
stay shorter - on job
better health habits
more networking
become volunteer
other plans