

Executive Summary

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Der Umgang kleiner und mittlerer Unternehmen mit den demografischen Herausforderungen – Eine Trendstudie

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Executive summary

In the underlying study the IfM Bonn analyses the expectations and reactions of SMEs related to the demographic change. Using a trend study approach, we compare strategic reactions in the distribution strategy and the human resources management in 2007 and 2017. A total of 800 German enterprises with a minimum of five employees of all industrial sectors and regions were surveyed in the fall/winter of 2017/18.

SMEs are better informed about the demographic change

SMEs are much better informed about the demographic change than ten years ago. Above all, they expect an aging population and workforce. A shrinking population is less of a concern. Along with the rising information level, SMEs show an information and activity level that comes close to that of large enterprises. The information and consulting services of federal and other public authorities seem to be effective.

The majority of SMEs adapt their distribution strategy

Within the last ten years, SMEs adapted their distribution strategy to the aging population. More than half of the enterprises made changes in their product and marketing strategy according to the needs of elderly customers. As opposed to the results of 2007, the enterprises expect more frequently a rise in domestic demand.

SMEs focus on preserving the ability to work and staff retention

Preserving the ability to work is of even greater importance for the enterprises than in 2007. This goes along with a stronger appreciation of elderly employees. To make a more effective use of external and internal labor potential, health care services are offered along with flexible elements of worktime management, allowing a better work-life-balance. Every third company offers further training for elderly employees, more than twice as many as in 2007. Still, many enterprises link several disadvantages to elderly employees, such as higher wages and deficits in qualification and physical capacities.

Recruitment and qualification remain a challenge

SMEs try to make more effective use of the labor potential of women, elderly and migrants. When it comes to recruiting skilled labor from abroad, SMEs ask

for external assistance. Challenges remain due to the lack of professional and language skills of migrant applicants. Insufficient language skills in the human resources departments of the enterprises make recruitment abroad even more difficult.

Regional disparities should be taken into account when designing support measures

Enterprises that are located in structurally and economically weak regions face bigger challenges concerning their human resources management than enterprises in other regions. A quarter of all administrative districts – mainly in Eastern Germany – show a shrinking trend. However, compared to 2007, more districts are bordering prospering areas of economic growth. Enterprises can take this into consideration in their distribution and human resource strategy. These circumstances should be taken into account when it comes to the design of information and support measures related to the demographic change.

Megatrends influence supply and demand of labor

Future long-term effects of the demographic change are highly uncertain due to the interactions between digitization, internationalization, migration and regional developments. Enterprises have to face this heightened uncertainty in their strategic planning. Staying informed about the demographic change and deciding about strategic reactions remains a constant challenge.