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Merinova: reconsidering employee age in European businesses

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Case summary

This case examines age-related discrimination challenges faced by workers over 55, using the Technology Center Merinova, a small European cluster company that enables innovations in the region, and its project manager, Tauno Kekäle, as a discussion context. In the case, the experience of Tauno Kekäle, a high-level professional close to the age of retirement, is juxtaposed with experiences of other similar-age professionals, illustrating the problem of age discrimination at work, especially at the stage of hiring, common in Europe and especially in Finland. The case supports reflections on age discrimination as a business management problem, demonstrating that expertise losses that happen if it remains unaddressed are harming business success. Through Merinova's best management practices, learners discover some easy-to-implement solutions for fixing age discrimination-related problems in business, especially in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The case relates to Sustainable Development Goals 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

1. Growing proportion of aged workforce in Europe and growing discrimination of them

The overall trend of demographic change in Europe was that of an ageing continent; the biggest age group in the age pyramid was people between 45 and 50 years of age, and fertility was low (Views of the World, 2014, Eurostat, 2024). Although there were country variations across Europe, in 2025 the EU population was estimated at 450.6 million people, and

more than one-fifth (22.0 per cent) were aged 65 years and over. The median age of the EU's population was 44.9 years and increased in most EU members between 2015 and 2025 (Eurostat, 2026).

Browsing LinkedIn with his morning coffee, Tauno Kekäle, project manager at the Technology Center Merinova, a successful and highly valued professional close to the age of retirement, spotted several posts on social media shared by professionals aged 55+. All had been recently rejected as job seekers due to their age:

All of my experience shows that age has practically no correlation with the performance required for the work. While the interview was mostly about what was wanted for the position, it was obvious that it was a young employee that the employer was searching for.

[T]he local sales manager of a national electrical wholesaler told me very directly when my age came out in the discussion that 'you understand that you are older than your colleagues.' When I questioned the relevance of that issue, his counterargument was to suggest that the age difference might bring out a conflict and hinder personnel chemistry[.]

A professional in the cable industry got a job. But despite the preliminary good sales results, his probation was terminated. In his own words, he 'didn't fit in.' Apparently, all the other new hires in that company were younger guys.

While reading these posts, Tauno considered: Why were older employees labelled as 'not fitting in' despite demonstrated performance? Why was their age considered a problem for building good relationships in the company and with customers? Why might someone be considered too old for work when they are still within the legally defined working age and are willing to work?

2. Too old to work?

Given that his Finnish peers were the authors of these social media posts, Tauno researched some statistics on demographics and information about the retirement system in Finland. The country's population was ageing very rapidly, showing the steepest age pyramid in Europe: already in 2010, when one person graduated from university, two people retired (Statistics Finland, 2010). This demographic imbalance continued over the years, projecting a significant shrinking population crisis by 2050 (*Helsinki Times*, 2025). These trends prompted significant

policy adjustments, such as raising the retirement age (Kotamäki and Lehtimäki, 2025) and making it flexible in line with life expectancy trends (Finnish Centre for Pensions, 2025).

Unlike many other EU countries (Foundation Robert Schuman, 2025), the retirement system in Finland had no fixed retirement age; the retirement age was defined personally, considering the year of birth and/or length of residence in Finland. The earliest retirement was possible at the age of 62, but with a fraction of the pension. When working, the pension accrued until the upper age limit of 69–70. After this age limit was reached, individuals were still permitted to work while receiving both a pension and work income; however, the pension itself did not accrue (Finnish Centre for Pensions, 2025; Nordic Council, n.d.). This meant that in Finland, workers of higher age lived within an institutional system that encouraged them to stay at work as long as possible.

Reading these facts, Tauno remembered several conversations with friends his age who were sharing the reasons why employers, especially small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in which they sought jobs, were concerned about their age:

When applying for a job in store sales, a local dealer from Southwestern Finland made me outraged by suggesting my age would make it difficult to manage the workload. One of his first questions was, ‘How do you think you can still cope with this kind of work?’

I was not chosen for the role of field salesman for a company in the Western and Central region area of Finland because I didn’t live near the company headquarters 100 km separated me from the office, but, as a general rule, the work would anyway have taken place elsewhere than at the office. Or so I thought.... Overall, it was pointedly stated that due to the mobility, as a rule, they did not think that I would be able to handle such a fast-moving job for such a long time because of my age, although I had already been doing the same type of job for 11 years in different positions!

Considering these conversations, Tauno thought, ‘Are companies that prefer a younger over an older workforce right in their hiring choices? Why have I not faced such discrimination, but my peers did?’ Driven by these reflections, Tauno examined his workplace, an SME called Merinova that was leading innovations and various developments in the region.

3. Merinova: a company with regional market influence

Technology Center Merinova, often referred to as Merinova, was an SME that represented about 180 industrial companies in the EnergyVaasa Cluster in Finland. Merinova, founded in 1989, played a pivotal role in strengthening the energy cluster of the Vaasa region by fostering collaboration among companies, universities, and organisations. Through its expertise in energy technology and business development, the company enabled groundbreaking innovations and new ventures that reached regional, national, and global impact (Merinova, n.d.).

Merinova employed 19 employees, all of diverse ages, and at least three were 55 years old or above. The working atmosphere among all employees was very friendly, and Tauno never felt that his skills were valued less or that he was excluded from any conversations because of his age. In fact, an age- and otherwise-diverse team allowed Merinova to represent and engage with diverse stakeholders, unite the experience and thinking of different generations, and successfully win international projects for regional development.

Several simple yet effective management practices enabled Merinova's openness to diversity and inclusion at work. Merinova hired people by considering both their high level of skills, their professional networks, and their tacit knowledge that has been obtained over years of experience. To ensure that all these aspects would be appreciated, Merinova made a practice of interviewing everybody who applied for a job and reflecting holistically on the profiles and potential of candidates. In addition, working principles in Merinova were based on getting work done with the belief that experience was appreciated, but learning daily was necessary for employees of any age. Performance assessment was based on assessing employees on an individual basis and understanding that people get the job done in different ways. This required a bit of managerial effort, no costs, but positively shaped Merinova's capabilities for innovation, fuelled inclusion, and increased the team's motivation to perform.

4. Rethinking how European businesses view employee age

In his conversations with companies from the EnergyVaasa cluster, Tauno often heard that regional employers, comprising smaller and

larger firms, wanted to find good employees and stated that employee shortage hindered their business growth the most, more than complex international politics or finding new customers. However, at the same time, Finland's unemployment rate for individuals over 55 was the highest in the Nordic countries (Trading Economics, 2026). In Finland and some other European countries, on average, about 50 per cent of employees experienced biases at work due to their age (Kiverä et al., 2025), with older employees most often experiencing limited access to training and development and less positive evaluations of their work results (Kiverä et al., 2026).

Considering the needs of the cluster Merinova represented and the experiences of his age peers from around Finland, Tauno thought, 'Can it be so that while companies complain of employee shortages, they simultaneously disregard experienced job seekers and employees of older ages? Can it be that the anti-discrimination laws that the country has are not functional in practice? Is age-based discrimination an issue that the state governance and social system should address, or is it a matter that businesses should reconsider and address to ensure their success?'

Questions for reflection

1. What does the case suggest about the ageing workforce in the EU and Finland? Study the age structure in the region/country where you live. What is the age pyramid like? What is the ratio of newborns relative to 20–30-year-olds, 40–50-year-olds, and retirees? How is your region's situation regarding employee age similar to or different from the situation described in this case?
2. Based on your reading of this case, what concerns do employees and job seekers of an older age report as they participate in or attempt to enter the workforce? Based on your opinion and research, to what degree are their concerns valid? Explain your reasoning.
3. As you examine social media outlets, popular business journals, local and national news, and talk to human resources professionals, how are employees of a higher age portrayed in your country, industry, or discipline? What do these information sources say about the ability and motivation of older professionals, as well as the pros and cons of employing them?
4. Anticipating the difficulties 55+-year-old professionals are likely to encounter securing or staying in employment, suggest some policies and company best practices that would level the employment

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- playing field for all ages of jobseekers. When answering this question, do your research and consider some of the best management practices that Merinova has adopted.
5. What, if any, role should companies, especially smaller firms, play in employing older employees to help solve the ageing problems in Europe? What are the reasons for and against their participation in this process?

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