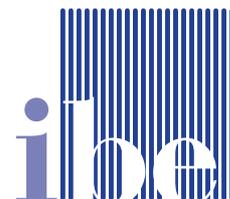


**NEW SKILLS AT WORK**

JPMORGAN CHASE & CO.



# EUROPEAN CASE STUDY

## Human resources policy in Germany: the life-stage management approach



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IBE

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The Institute for Employment and Employability (Institut für Beschäftigung und Employability, IBE) was founded in 2003 at Ludwigshafen University of Applied Sciences. Main topics of research are the demographic change, work-life-balance, employability and employability management and the future of the work environment. The research team, consisting of Prof Dr Jutta Rump and several researchers, uses qualitative as well as quantitative methods. The Institute for Employment and Employability is member of many research groups and committees in the region of Rhineland-Palatine as well as in the whole of Germany and Europe, using networking and interdisciplinary approaches in its projects. Special importance is attached to the practicability of the research results and their implementation. Furthermore, the Institute for Employment and Employability focuses on scientific publications in personnel-related magazines and renowned publishing houses.

For more, visit [www.ibe-ludwigshafen.de](http://www.ibe-ludwigshafen.de)

## ABOUT THIS PAPER

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This case study is part of a series of analyses that are being conducted in 2015/16 on aspects of European skills issues and labour markets. These case studies will be compiled in a format that allows for cross-country comparisons to be made and lessons to be drawn for both policy and practice.

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## 1. What is life-stage management?

This case study examines a human resource policy known as a 'life stage management', which several companies in Germany have implemented over the past decade. Life-stage management focuses on employees, taking into account all their professional and private needs "from the first to the last day" of their working life. Its aim is to maintain and promote employee motivation, health and qualifications/skills through taking a holistic approach that reconciles business needs with employees' own objectives and family commitments.

Overall it enables employers to:

- safeguard sustainable employability,
- respond to demographic change and
- ensure a meaningful work-life balance.

## 2. Why is this important?

The work environment in Germany is changing. Key trends that are influencing it are:

- **Demographic change:** Reduced fertility and increased longevity are reducing the numbers of new entrants into the workforce and increasing the span of work years. In the future, "stretches" of 45 working years – or more – will be the rule rather than the exception. Since the number of workers entering the labour force is falling, it is essential to ensure higher levels of participation from groups that have hitherto been under-represented (women, older members of the population, people from a migrant background and with experience of migration, as well as people with an interrupted employment history or those who experience difficulty in making the transition from school to work).
- **Technical and economic trends:** The modern workplace is characterised by increasing digitalisation, growing media influence and an increasing need for rapid response capability and innovation in the face of global competition. Jobs are becoming more knowledge/skill-intensive and we are seeing a decoupling of time and place of work that is blurring the boundaries between work and leisure time. Individual workers are required to be both flexible and adaptable to maintain lifelong employability.
- **Social trends:** The workforce is becoming increasingly diverse. Employers must manage greater numbers of older and female employees, different generations with partially conflicting values, and a growing number of people from migrant

backgrounds. At the same time, even if workers themselves are similar, their work and life plans are becoming increasingly diverse. Family roles are also changing: a growing number of fathers wish to participate more actively in the upbringing of their children and adapt their workload accordingly (even if only episodically). The Federal Government's 8<sup>th</sup> Family Report (*8. Familienbericht der Bundesregierung*) focuses on the subject of "Time for Family" (*Zeit für Familie*), identifying the need for care solutions and for parents to have adequate family time to prevent them leaving the workforce for prolonged periods (Sachverständigenkommission zum achten Familienbericht 2011). The extra parental allowance ("ElterngeldPlus") has been introduced to make it easier to combine parental leave and part-time employment.<sup>1</sup>

Combined, these trends pose a huge challenge for employees and employers alike. Employers are only able to maintain competitiveness if their employees have the requisite knowledge and skills and are able and willing to keep up to date. At the same time, employees are becoming more demanding: they want to have access to the tools and practices that enable them to perform at their best. In addition to their career and family activities, they need to set aside time to regenerate and achieve a work-life balance (IfB! 2012).

Both sides – employees and employers – have a responsibility to shape the framework for each other in such a way that motivation, skills and health – in other words, employability – can be maintained and developed over an increasingly lengthy working life.

The graphic below shows how these various trends come together:

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<sup>1</sup> Parents who work part-time after the birth of a child can extend their entitlement to parental allowance: one month of regular parental allowance equates to two months of extra parental allowance. If mothers and fathers both decide to work part-time, for a four-month period and on the basis of a 25 to 30-hour-week, the "partnership bonus" (*Partnerschaftsbonus*) entitles them to four additional months of extra parental allowance (BMFSFJ 2015).

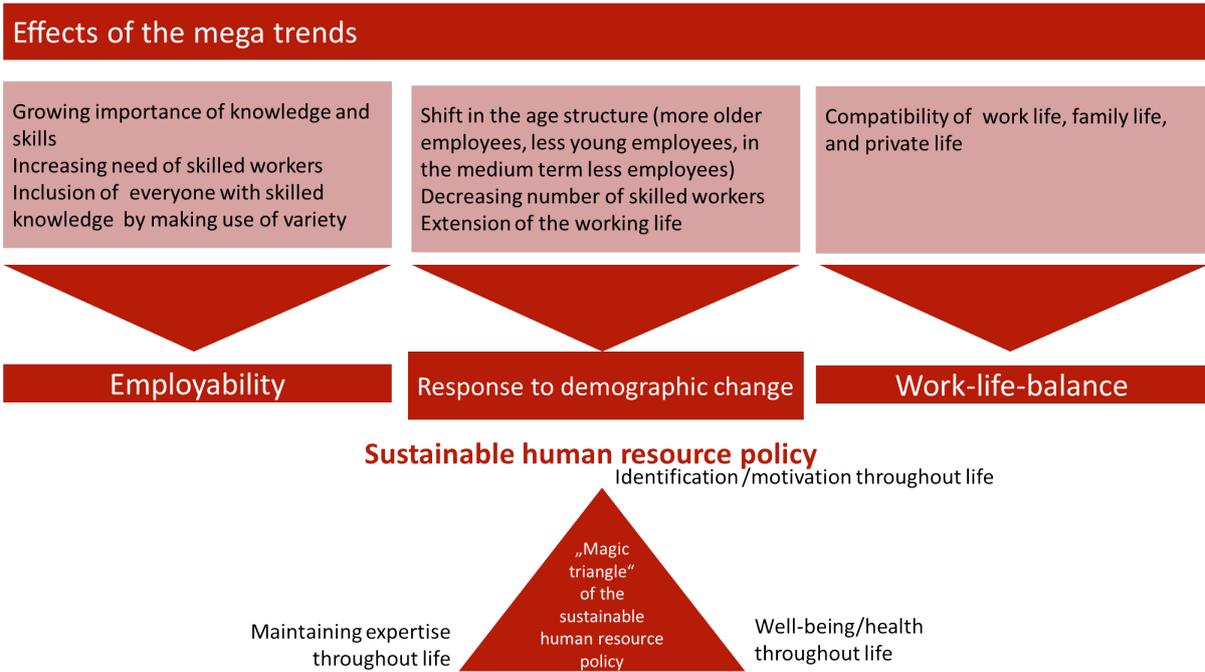


Fig. 1: Mega trends and their effects on human resource policy (Rump et al. 2014, p. 15)

### 3. How can human resource policy be made more sustainable?

The so-called “magic triangle” of employability entails three core aspects: competencies, motivation and well-being.

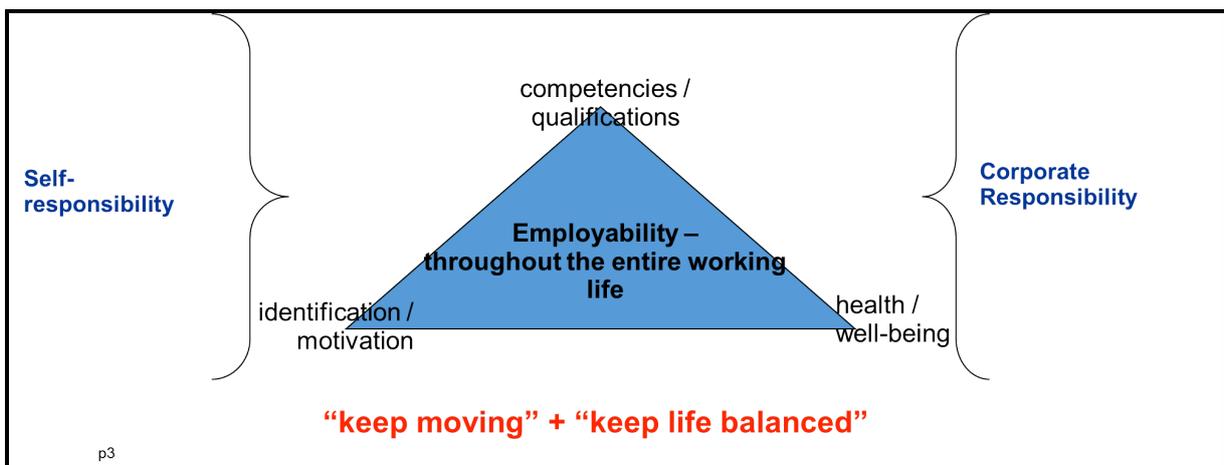


Fig. 1: The “magic triangle of employability” (authors’ own graph)

Competencies and qualifications lie at the heart of employability. These include job-specific expertise and key social/personal skills (such as the ability to work in a team, to communicate, to handle conflicts and to reflect, as well as empathy and entrepreneurial thinking and action). Other important attributes include personal responsibility, initiative, openness, commitment, ability to work under pressure and a willingness to learn.

These come together with motivation and health/well-being to enhance employability. This is the responsibility of **both** the employer and the employee: just as the company bears responsibility, so does every individual within it.

The working group of the German Initiative for Employment (*Initiative für Beschäftigung! – IfB!*), funded by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (*Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales*), recently hypothesised that in order to safeguard employability, a far broader perspective must be taken, so that work and personal priorities are not viewed as being in conflict with each other.<sup>2</sup>

Life-stage human resource policy does just this: it provides a means of matching work more closely with employees' personal circumstances. Everyone's private life is characterised by highs and lows, defining events and commitments outside the workplace. Employees do not leave these personal matters "at the company gate", but carry them over into their professional lives. In critical cases – if no attention is paid to them – these personal matters can significantly impair motivation, health and skills.

Employees typically have two types of **life-stage concerns**: (i) family-related issues (parenthood, care commitments, a partner's life and work situation and one's broad social network); and (ii) outside/non-family concerns (hobbies, voluntary work, sickness, secondary employment, privately organised further training, critical or traumatic events and personal debt).

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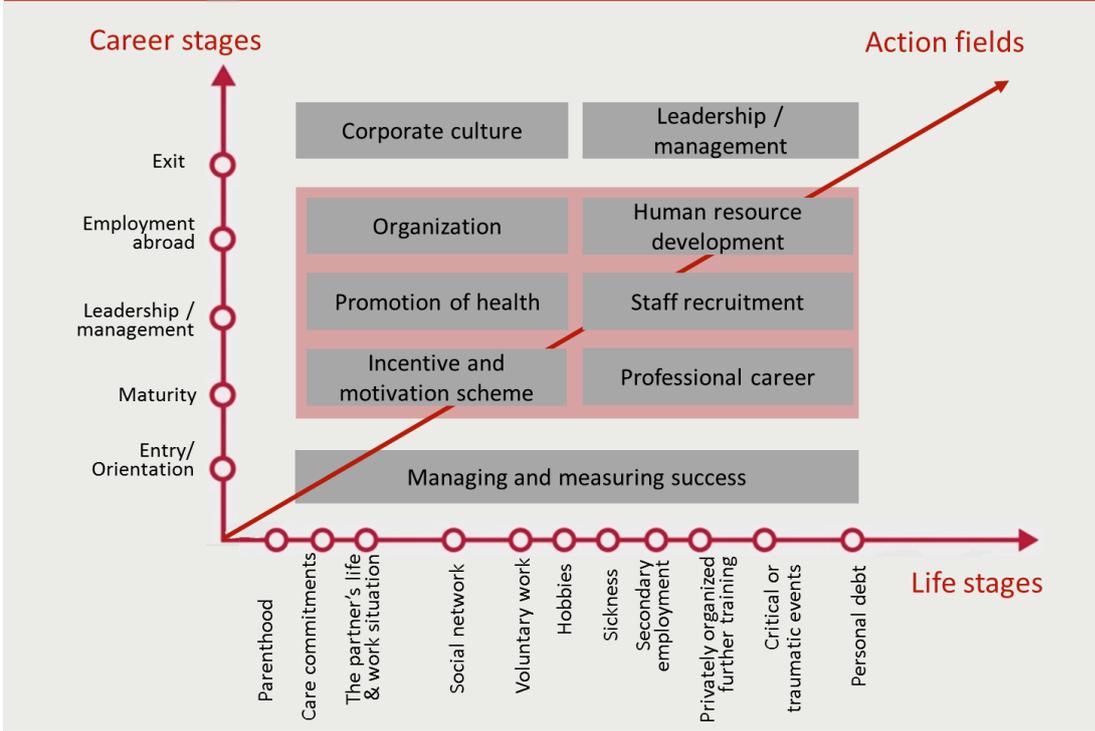
<sup>2</sup> The working group members put forward the following theory in their position paper: "The employment-focused view of work will have to be replaced by a broader perspective, in which work during the various life stages is considered more in terms of meaningfulness and social responsibility, and perceived as a societal resource. This resource and meaning-oriented approach is the prerequisite for working life and private life to coexist on an equal footing. If work is no longer seen as an antithesis to other activities – be they parenting, care commitments, acquiring skills, community work, unpaid caregiving or regeneration –, it will be considered only natural for intensity, flexibility and availability for work to differ during certain stages of life." (IfB! 2012, p. 26).

These are experienced over different **career stages** (NB. These are **not** age-related and not everyone goes through all of them):

- **Entry/Orientation:** This can be either initial employment with the company or professional reorientation within an existing organisation (including returning to work following a prolonged period of absence, such as parental leave).
- **Maturity:** People classed as “professionally mature” are high performers who possess a considerable amount of know-how acquired via specialist tasks and project work. They often find themselves on a “career plateau” if their job does not offer any significant scope for development or career progression.
- **Employment abroad:** Taking up a position abroad generally involves a dramatic change in living circumstances, sometimes accompanied by a culture shock. This not only affects the employee him/herself, but his/her partner and/or family as well. This can lead to problems in reconciling work and private life, especially if living abroad is incompatible with a particular stage of life.
- **Leadership/management:** Taking on leadership / management responsibility for the first time is a challenge that should not be underestimated. New responsibilities can be particularly challenging if they coincide with changes in family circumstances (such as a family member becoming dependent on long-term care).
- **Exit:** Exit may be permanent (e.g. on completion of an apprenticeship, professional reorientation or retirement) or temporary (parental or caregiver leave and sabbaticals).

Figure 3 below provides an overview of how life-stage and career-stage concerns can be matched.

## The concept of a life-phase oriented human resource policy



*Fig. 3: The master plan for life-stage oriented human resource policy (Rump et al. 2014, p. 21)*

Life-stage oriented human resource policy calls for a whole host of individual measures, most of which are already familiar. What is novel is the broad framework that helps to ensure that business interests are reconciled with the needs of employees in a precise and individualised way, without creating a patchwork of disparate strategies. This is both more practical and likely to meet with greater acceptance from the workforce and management.

All action fields denoted in the figure above play an equal role in safeguarding employee health, motivation and skills/expertise. That said, corporate culture and leadership are the cornerstones upon which all-else rests. Well-intended attempts at life-stage oriented human resource policy are doomed to failure if they are not supported by an appropriate corporate and leadership culture.

Life-stage oriented human resource development demands a forward thinking approach. Each individual's skills are subject to continuous review and adjustment. This review process should focus not only on specific business requirements or the current employment situation, but also on expected future demand and skills requirements. The initiative has to come from

both the employer and from employees. The latter are not simply passive recipients of training; they play an active role in shaping their own destiny. Personal responsibility can be enhanced by offering staff greater flexibility to organise their own training initiatives as well as consulting them on matters relating to the work environment. Efforts undertaken on both sides are, then, mutually reinforcing and stimulating.

For human resource development to promote lifelong employability, while taking into account the various life and career stages of employees, it should be based on the following principles:

- **Fostering “lifelong learning”:** This requires a “learning culture” within the company so that learning processes can be incorporated at various life-stages. Such a culture acknowledges that skills acquired in an informal context, for example through voluntary work or family-related leave, contribute to lifelong learning and to the accumulation of experience, in the same way that formal qualifications do. Lifelong learning can be achieved through methods such as “learning islands”, “workshop circles”, job enrichment, job enlargement and job rotation. For companies, e-learning and blended learning programs offer many advantages (in-house attendance, greater relevance and reduced cost). They provide employees with a high degree of control over their time, allowing them to tailor their training to the respective stages of their lives and careers.
- **Target group differentiation:** Under an individualised approach to human resource development, greater emphasis is placed on the stages of life, qualifications, strengths, preferences and interests, life histories, areas of responsibility and specific tasks of employees. Individualised training schemes need to take into account staff availability (e.g. offering training on a part-time basis, dispensing with weekend seminars, offering childcare while training is taking place, and providing training close to where people live/work) and be age-appropriate. Adult learning is very different from learning at school or as an apprentice. Staff who have interrupted their careers for a limited period (for example, to take parental/caregiver leave or a sabbatical) may require targeted training on re-entry and/or can be offered training while on leave, in order to maintain links with the company and enhance employability.
- **Focusing on interdisciplinary skills:** To promote lifelong employability, human resource development must impart a broad range of “soft skills” – such as initiative, personal responsibility and social competence – in addition to specialised, industry-related and technical knowledge. Soft skills can also be acquired outside the

workplace (e.g. through family-related tasks or voluntary work). It is important that these are probed during regular discussions with employees: it is not uncommon for staff to “secretly” possess skills which, as they are unrecognised are not put to good use, to their employer’s detriment. Human resource development that is oriented towards achieving greater compatibility between work and family life acknowledges skills acquired outside the workplace when filling vacancies and takes an open-minded view of family and private concerns when conducting job interviews or providing further training and promotion opportunities.

## 4. Putting Sustainable Human Resource Policy into practice

### *What has been done so far?*

Between 2007-8 IBE developed the concept of life-stage oriented human resource policy in Rhineland-Palatinate (one of the federal states in Germany) within the framework of a project conducted by the Ministry of Economic Affairs (*Wirtschaftsministerium*).<sup>3</sup> Due to considerable success, a further project phase was implemented between 2009 and 2011. “*Strategy for the Future – life-stage oriented human resource policy*” was introduced in nine small and medium-sized businesses, two large enterprises and a public service organisation, with funding from the European Union and the Rhineland-Palatinate Ministry of Economic Affairs, Climate Protection, Energy and Regional Planning (*Ministerium für Wirtschaft, Klimaschutz, Energie und Landesplanung Rheinland-Pfalz*).

The aim of the pilot scheme was to develop approaches, concepts and implementation strategies that were practice-relevant, well designed and action-oriented. Successful methods and approaches were identified – alongside obstacles and impediments – with the help of professional organisations, trade unions and junior managers.

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<sup>3</sup> When developing the following concept for life-stage oriented human resource policy, the Institute for Employment and Employability IBE at the University of Applied Sciences in Ludwigshafen picked up on the strengths and weaknesses of existing approaches. These include, in particular, life-cycle oriented approaches (Graf, A., 2002; Flüter-Hoffmann, C., 2008; Rading, J., 2010), life-event oriented approaches (Armutat, S. et al., 2009), instrument-category oriented approaches (Brinkmann, T. M., 2009; Döring, W., 2008) and life-history oriented approaches (Oldenbourg, R. / Ilmarinen, J., 2010; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2007). In relevant literature and practical personnel work within the business context, these terms are not always clearly distinguished from one another.

Following the conclusion of the pilot scheme, a network of over 100 companies has been established. These companies have come to recognise that life-stage oriented human resource policy is a key instrument for securing skilled employees. They are currently implementing a wide range of related measures (although the term “life stage human resource policy” is not always used). There has been broad interest from other federal states regarding the Rhineland-Palatinate approach.

The box below provides some examples of the measures that different companies have put in place.

**Box 1: Examples from business practice**

- A medium-sized financial sector company (workforce of around 300) started implementing a life-stage oriented human resource policy in 2010. The instruments used include: age structure analysis, which provides simple tools for succession planning and staff potential assessment; the inclusion of life-stage orientation considerations in annual staff appraisals; and the development of age-appropriate learning concepts (Ahlring 2014).
- A small firm (40 employees) in the media sector has already won several awards for its life-stage oriented human resource policy. The firm has made continuous training for its employees a key business principle. The measures implemented include a staff mentoring scheme (*Mitarbeiter schulen Mitarbeiter*) as well as concrete opportunities to undertake part-time study and gain vocational qualifications while in employment (Sabath 2014; Sabath Media 2015).
- A large enterprise from the financial sector has introduced, *inter alia*, a specialist career path within the framework of its life-stage oriented human resource policy. This provides employees who do not wish to pursue a management or project-based career with opportunities for personal advancement (Reicherzer 2014).
- Several enterprises have adopted the practice of addressing private matters in regular staff appraisal interviews to ensure that management is aware of the importance of considering private matters / life stages. Managers are encouraged and trained to include in standard staff questionnaires questions regarding possible conflicts between life and work, wishes for greater or fewer work challenges and career planning that is consistent with private priorities. Responses are provided on a voluntary basis (Rump/Eilers 2014).

### *What lessons have been learned?*

The way in which life-stage oriented human resource policy is implemented is unique to each company: they define the life and career stages which are important for their particular situation and also adapt possible measures and instruments to their needs and possibilities. The first step is to analyse existing strategies and instruments and to check whether they are suitable in different life and career stages. Interviews with enterprises that have been part of the model scheme yield the following lessons about implementation:

- Sufficient time must be set aside for implementation and evaluation, with fixed dates and milestones being established. If this is not done, there is a risk that tasks will be repeatedly postponed.
- External support is very important, at least during the first phase, in order to expand the horizons of those involved.
- It is essential to involve employees and employee representatives from the very beginning.
- It can be very useful and inspiring to discuss experience in this area with other companies.
- At the outset it is important to undertake a systematic evaluation of the situation and an analysis of the need for particular measures. At the same time, existing practices should be critically examined.
- Effective internal communication is very important throughout the process in order to keep all interest groups in the loop.
- Success can be enhanced by communicating positive experiences both internally and externally.
- Implementation should be supervised by an internal project team.

Companies that have made their life-stage oriented concepts and measures public, for example through newspaper articles, lectures at events or videos posted on YouTube, report a rise in job applications. One of the companies which took part in the pilot scheme, carried out an employee survey to assess attitudes after the introduction of life-stage oriented considerations in staff appraisal interviews. It found that more than 80% of employees were very positive about private matters being addressed in interviews. The following are some of the comments received:

“The activities concerning the career and skill development make the employees feel that they are being taken seriously and hence they are even more committed to work well than before. The understanding among employees also increases significantly, and loyalty and solidarity within the team has noticeably improved.” (Sabath 2011, p. 85).

- “One of the biggest advantages is strengthening the ties between the employee and the company. Furthermore, the employer gets much more information about his/her employees and can respond to them better and take the employees’ strengths into consideration during planning.” (Sabath 2011, p. 85).
- “Performance, motivation and identification of the employees are crucial for the success of the company. To achieve this, the integration of the idea of working in accordance with life and career stages is the key.” (Ahlring 2011, p. 79).
- “There is an increase in the individual happiness and motivation of all employees. A structured and, in the long term, successful human resource planning and human resource development can be ensured.” (Herbig 2011, p. 87).

A study conducted by the Cologne Institute for Economic Research (*Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft (IW) Köln*) indicates that companies which pursue a life-stage oriented human resource policy show annual profits significantly more often, have better earnings expectations, are more innovative than peer companies and, in some cases, also score better with regard to human resource policy target figures such as sick leave. (IW Köln 2014).

In 2013, the *Forschungszentrum Familienbewusste Personalpolitik (FFP)* (Research Center for Family-oriented Human Resource Policy) looked at the business effects of a family-oriented human resource policy for the second time. Since family-oriented human resource policy can be thought of as the forerunner to life-stage oriented human resource policy, the results of this study are illustrative. According to the study, high awareness of family orientation is accompanied by, inter alia, less absence from work and a lower rate of sick leave, fewer terminations by the employees themselves and a better quality of job applicants. Furthermore, at companies that increasingly and systematically focus on the compatibility of career and family, employee motivation is 14 percent higher and productivity is 13 percent higher compared to the overall average of companies (FFP 2013).

#### *How about the government?*

Federal and regional government bodies throughout Germany are now beginning to realise the importance of life-stage orientation and have included reference to it in several reports.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the Federal Government’s Expert Commission for the Compilation of the First Equality Report (*Sachverständigenkommission zur Erstellung des Ersten Gleichstellungsberichtes der Bundesregierung*) / Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft zur Förderung der angewandten Forschung e.V. 2011),

In addition, the Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs and Energy (*Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie*) commissioned a study last year aimed at gathering empirical evidence on the advantages of a systematic, strategic life-stage oriented human resource policy (IW Cologne 2014).

Moreover, the Federal Administration (*Bundesverwaltung*) has pledged to act as a role model in this area and has published guidelines on the shaping of life-stage oriented human resource policy [Federal Ministry of the Interior (*Bundesministerium des Innern – BMI* 2012)]. This includes case studies from the Federal Employment Agency (*Bundesagentur für Arbeit*) and various federal government ministries. The Federal Employment Agency (*Bundesagentur für Arbeit*), for example, has adopted an approach which includes: long-term working hour accounts (*Langzeitarbeitskonten*): mobile working; family support services; job re-entry schemes; part-time apprenticeships; seminars preparing for retirement; and preventative health management (Behrens/Hecker 2014).

On a political level, life-stage oriented human resource policy can be assisted by creating incentives for combining work and private life – for example, by means of the recently introduced “ElterngeldPlus” (extra parental allowance) or by further improving the availability and quality of appropriate support services for children and people in need of long-term care. In addition, the state can assist businesses by creating closer links between the various fields of education and helping small and medium-sized companies collaborate with education providers to enhance human resource development.

## 5. Conclusions

In view of the trends and developments shaping our world of work, companies must find ways to safeguard the motivation, health and skills of their employees over an extended working life as well as to position themselves as attractive employers within the labor market. Due to shared demographic trends, these are concerns for almost every country in Europe.

Life-stage oriented human resource policy is one important way of doing this. It takes into account the employer’s interests and reconciles them with the needs of employees, a win-

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the Green Paper entitled “Work 4.0” (*Arbeiten 4.0*) issued by the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (*Bundesministeriums für Arbeit und Soziales – BMAS* 2015), and the research paper entitled “Shaping the working world of tomorrow” (*Arbeit der Zukunft gestalten*) published by the employment initiative “Initiative für Beschäftigung!” (IfB! 2012) and commissioned by the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.

win situation. It safeguards skills which are costly to build and expensive to replace while shortening the time that employees need to take out from work to accommodate key life events.

Life-stage management therefore enables companies to satisfy market requirements and generate innovative strengths, thus improving their position in the market. They can better attract and retain skilled workers of differing ages, generations, genders, origins and cultures. It enhances their attractiveness as employers and so helps safeguard their future. In this sense it can be viewed as a type of investment policy. A study carried out by IBE shows that challenges vary in different sectors but that approaches to a life-stage oriented human resource policy do not differ significantly. Furthermore, it is clear that company size is not relevant to whether a life-stage oriented human resource policy can be successfully implemented. Quality is more important than quantity: what is really important is to initiate a general change in awareness as opposed to any specific measures or combination of measures. This may be easier in small and medium-sized companies than in larger group structures.

For employees, the approach offers many benefits including opportunities for continuous learning and an early return to work after key life events. This means that they remain competent at their jobs – a decisive success factor in terms of maintaining skills and progressing along a career path. This is especially important for women, who are still more likely than men to face a double or triple burden as a result of work and private commitments (looking after children and relatives in need of long-term care, carrying out household chores, etc.). From a socio-political perspective, this is in line with the new perception of gender roles in partnerships.

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