

Seniors bolster workforce at Berlin start-ups

May 28 2014, by Frederic Happe



Picture taken on May 8, 2014 shows 63-year-old German Angela Runge presenting some food she has prepared for young software designers during a lunch in a IT firm in Berlin

Tech start-ups may often be littered with empty pizza boxes, but at a Berlin IT firm, a mouthwatering aroma wafting across the desks promises something truly revolutionary—a tasty and wholesome home-cooked lunch.

While the youthful software designers have been tinkering on their latest smartphone apps, 63-year-old Angela Runge has beavered away in her

kitchen at home, preparing a meal that is a far cry from common office fare.

Although she is approaching retirement age, Runge is part of a growing group of elderly citizens and pensioners employed by German companies in a push to create an inter-generational and experience-sharing workforce.

"I'm happy to be able to show these young people what it is to eat well," she told AFP, serving up soup, salad with flowers in it, trout tart, seasonal favourite asparagus and steamed potatoes, followed by panna cotta with strawberries.

"The vast majority of them are young single men. Cooking isn't their thing."

In 2007 Germany decided to progressively raise the retirement age to 67, however a reform passed last week allows some employees to stop working at 63.

With many people now fit enough to [work](#) longer and beyond [retirement age](#), an increasing number of Germans are looking for new forms of employment to remain active in their old age.

More than one million, or about five percent of retired Germans work, according to the last official available data.

That's a 30-percent rise since 2003.

Around 800,000 German retirees meanwhile have a "mini-job", work for which a maximum of 450 euros (\$614) a month is paid, while another 170,000 people work but earn more than that sum.

'A convivial gathering'

Stefan Gerstmeier, executive director of Neofonie Mobile, enthused about Runge's culinary skills: "It's really always excellent. Every time it's different, very varied."

It was his idea to advertise for a retiree to prepare a monthly meal of good food served in a convivial atmosphere for the 35 staff at the company, after hearing about similar cases at other firms.

"We did a test meal to decide between the candidates. With Angela, everything corresponded to what we wanted, the food but also her personality."

The tasty lunches make it possible to "create a convivial gathering once a month and take care of the working atmosphere. Ok, we don't sign big contracts while we're sitting at the table but that produces interesting things in terms of conversations."

Runge sets up a buffet with the dishes she's cooked at home, and the employees help themselves in a relaxed atmosphere, seated on benches around folding tables.

"Each time I choose a theme for my meal. I've already done a Russian meal, a Venetian meal and obviously a Berlin one," she told AFP.

Not only for the money

Official data shows that one in two state pensions amounts to less than 700 euros a month, probably largely due to a strong tendency for women in Germany to work part-time.

Runge, who also works as a German-English translator and interpreter as well as a home help for the ill, is paid five euros (\$7) per person, per month to prepare her menu, plus a small salary she prefers to keep under wraps.

Taking into account the time required to prepare the meal, she said the payment ended up being less than Germany's recently introduced national minimum wage of 8.50 euros an hour.

"This money is welcome, but I don't do this work only for that," she said.

Juergen Deller, a professor in [human resource management](#) at Lueneburg University, said that a study, which has not yet been published, showed that 40 percent of seniors wanted to continue to work after [retirement](#).

"And many do it because they feel like being involved. They do it for the social contact, to be useful, to pass on their experience.

"Purely human reasons are at the heart of their desire to continue to work," he added.

He pointed out that older people could prove a future source of labour for Germany's small and medium sized companies, as was not the case 20 years ago.

However he cautioned that for the practice to really succeed, society also needed to adapt, with new kinds of employment contracts and more flexible ways of working.

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