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## From restructuring to career transitions: a new era of occupational mobility?

The effects of the health crisis have forced businesses in many sectors to deal with a sharp decline in activity, which in some cases is likely to last a long time. A series of measures already exist to support employees obliged to find alternative employment. However, the current socio-economic crisis undoubtedly calls for more ambitious management of career transitions, particularly for the least skilled workers. Drawing on a synthesis of its recent studies on the subject, Céreq has identified the levers to be pulled in order to promote more forward-looking and collective management of occupational mobility.



OCCUPATIONAL  
RETRAINING

CAREER TRANSITION  
EMPLOYMENT SCHEME

FLEXICURITY

CERTIFICATION

Since the beginning of the health crisis, the various lockdown measures have led to a drastic reduction in or even a complete cessation of activity in many sectors, with significant consequences for work and employment systems. Although a recovery is on the cards for 2021, it seems far from guaranteeing a return to the pre-pandemic situation. Like the aviation industry, for example, in which both manufacturing and airports and their infrastructure have been affected, many sectors will be unable to maintain their activity levels and will have to consider restructuring plans that will necessarily involve career changes for many of their workers. In this respect, France has at its disposal a set of tools that has been gradually built up from measures introduced over the course of the last fifty years (cf. Box) and has been very recently supplemented by the collective transition scheme. This scheme has been put in place by central government with the active support of the social partners in order collectively to identify possible ways out of a socio-economic crisis in the field of employment that is absolutely without precedent. It is based on joint action taken by companies, support organisations and regional training organisations with a view to securing individuals' mobility trajectories by directing them towards fast-growing occupations.

Drawing on recent Céreq studies (cf. bibliography of Céreq studies), the aim of this edition of *Training & Employment* is to widen the focus: how can we take advantage of the current period in order to involve

all the actors in the labour market in improving the planning, construction and coordination of career changes and thereby put in place a real system for managing occupational transitions? After all, the impacts of the health crisis have further compounded the fundamental trend towards the transformation of economic structures linked to the digital and ecological transitions and have thrust the competences of economically active individuals into the limelight [1]. In this regard, one population deserves particular attention, namely those holding jobs requiring few if any skills. While we acknowledge the simplistic and often stigmatising nature of this categorisation [2], it has to be noted that this population often constitutes the main adjustment variable in economic restructurings.

### Restructuring plans that often lead to the exclusion of the least well qualified

Why do restructuring exercises usually lead to the exclusion of the least well qualified employees? Examination of the differentiated characteristics of the occupational trajectories of employees in the companies concerned provides an answer to this question. In a Céreq study that draws on the Defis survey on employees' trajectories in their companies between 2014 and 2017 [3], it is shown that 12% of employees (three quarters of them clerical or manual workers) had trajectories described as being "at a standstill", with no changes of job and little professional development. Although they had undertaken the training required

## 1 The long history of the French-style management of restructuring programmes

The social fact embodied in France's restructuring programmes has been constructed over the course of a history mediated through the creation and accumulation of multiple levers of action during the last 70 years.

### From the 1950s to the 1980s: collective levers for managing large-scale restructurings

- Management of voluntary severance by means of individual financial incentives (severance bonuses) or of the labour market through early retirement schemes.
- Establishment of redeployment units by companies involved in closing down sites.
- Establishment of redeployment schemes based on state-aided training programmes (under the umbrella of the National Employment Fund/*Fonds National pour l'Emploi* set up in 1963).

### From the 1990s to the present day: responsibility for dealing with the consequences of restructuring programmes transferred to companies and individual employees

- For individuals:
  - emergence of an individual right to a change of occupation or career through various forms of contract concluded with the employees in order to give them a status and guarantees between being made redundant and accessing a new job: retraining agreement, retraining leave, employment security contract, etc.
  - recourse to measures provided under the right to training, notably in order to facilitate access to lengthy training programmes: the individual training leave (*congé individuel de formation* or CIF), which in 2018 was replaced by the personal training for transition account as part of an occupational transition plan.
  - development of a right to personalised counselling on career and skills: skills assessment (from 1991), professional development counselling (from 2014).
- For companies:
  - from 1989 onwards, obligation to put in place a social plan, which in 2002 became the employment protection plan, in order to avoid or reduce redundancies by activating the various levers mentioned above.
  - since the beginning of the 2000s, companies have had to add a preventive strand to their corporate planning by adopting forward-looking approaches to the management of jobs and skills in order to anticipate changes in jobs and skills at as early a stage as possible.

Sources : [18] [19]

by law, only 37% of them had been able to take part in non-compulsory training programmes, compared with 58% of all employees, and this despite the fact that they were equally keen to do so (70% compared with 68%).

This situation, largely the result of management decisions, led to this group of employees being restricted to strictly adaptive training that did not enable them to progress in their careers. Consequently, they were not equipped to embark on a major career change in the event of a restructuring taking place.

As a result, short-term solutions based on severance bonuses or early retirement programmes are generally adopted in such situations as mutually acceptable compromises, to the detriment of more ambitious solutions that aim to help the employees concerned to return to employment on a permanent basis. This is exemplified by the restructuring decisions taken during the past year by companies such as Michelin, Aéroports de Paris and the SNCF. Even though they are few in number, the examples of successful moves into different jobs or sectors made by vulnerable employees deserve to be

examined in detail in order to analyse the underlying choices made. This applies to a back-to-work scheme put in place in 2014 and 2015 to offer strengthened support for 4,400 employees made redundant by the transport and logistics companies Mory Ducros and Mory Global [4]. Under this scheme, lasting solutions were found for 96% of the employees, 40% of whom had few if any qualifications. This extraordinary result is explained by an exceptional level of institutional and financial support, underwritten over the long term (almost 6 years) by the state. The scheme enabled 70% of the affected employees to embark on training programmes; for those likely to face difficulties due to poor language skills or computer illiteracy, comprehensive support processes were put in place. Thus while it is possible during a restructuring process to make good the skills deficits of the least well qualified individuals, large-scale and costly programmes have to be put in place, which may well put a damper on the widespread adoption of such schemes.

### For shared management of the career transitions of the most vulnerable

This now widely acknowledged diagnosis of the accumulated risks faced by the least qualified individuals in restructuring situations has already received a number of specific responses in terms of access to training. In particular, the Act of 5 September 2018 increased the annual amount paid into the personal training accounts (*compte personnel de formation/CPF*) of individuals whose qualifications fall below level 3 of the French national qualifications framework (CAP – basic vocational certificate). The question of their ability to initiate training independently, particularly by means of the CPF app, has become crucial. On this point, and despite the short period of time that has elapsed, take-up of the CPF one year after its introduction seems to be a reality for all categories of employee, since 63% of the beneficiaries are clerical or manual workers or technicians. However, this finding is not sufficient to eliminate the serious deficit in access to training for the least qualified employees in French companies.

Furthermore, a response based solely on training does not in itself appear to really secure individual trajectories in the event of restructuring. For the least qualified, an additional stage is necessary in which they acquire skills associated with a specific trade or occupation that can also be used in other contexts. If the acquisition of these so-called transferable skills [6] is to be truly viable, then individuals' commitment to training must be matched by the assumption of responsibility by their employers. This is the thinking behind the possibility very recently offered to companies to contribute to the funding of their employees'

personal training accounts in order to jointly construct a training initiative with them. More broadly, however, there are various levers that have to be activated in order to launch workers with few qualifications into a process of occupational transition. Various Céreq studies (notably those based on analyses of the Defis surveys) enable us to identify four main levers.

### # Lever 1: mapping out trajectories by linking them to work

The aim of the first lever is to involve employees with the lowest levels of qualification in mapping out trajectories in line with their occupational identities. For a good number of them, as is well known, attitudes towards training are frequently adversely affected by school failure syndrome, which makes it difficult for them to commit themselves voluntarily to the “standard” training course formula. In such situations, employees can have recourse to two schemes. The first is the validation of acquired experience (VAE), which seems particularly well suited to occupations in which experience acquired on the ground frequently takes precedence over formal qualifications. This applies notably to the construction and public works sector, recently studied by Céreq, where there is demonstrably a desire “to revive the use of VAE” by using it as a tool in developing career trajectories and raising skill levels [7]. The success of this approach depends crucially on the key role played by the OPCOs (*opérateurs de compétences* – the new vocational training support agencies) in developing collective and inter-company VAE practices, which are regarded as the only way of successfully supporting candidates in a demanding process.

A second scheme, a much more recent one since it was introduced by the 2018 Act, seeks to acknowledge the value of work itself as a form of training through the implementation of on-the-job training programmes (*Actions de Formations en Situation de Travail / AFEST*). This scheme is of major interest in the light of Céreq’s findings on the extent of informal learning that can be observed in individual work dynamics [8]. By seeking gradually to certify the skills acquired through work, these on-the-job training programmes can help to redefine the profiles of many occupations. The development of such programmes might enable French firms to join their counterparts in several European countries (notably in Northern Europe) that have long made extensive use of this form of training to provide life-long training [9].

Thus by attributing a new value to experience and to work and repositioning them at the heart of the trajectories of employees with the lowest levels of qualification, these categories of workers can be launched on to the upward career trajectories from which many of them are excluded.

### # Lever 2: supporting individuals in the construction of their trajectories

However, a lever of this kind cannot be effectively activated unless the modes of information and advice on the various career development schemes have also been devised. The point here is to enable individuals to identify the potential for transferability of the skills they already possess. The ease of identification varies depending on the type of activity in question. While such potential is readily identified in the case of occupations that cut across various sectors, such as sales jobs, it is much less easily identified in more specific occupations, like those in the construction industry, for example. Hence the importance of the second lever, namely the provision of support for individuals as they construct their occupational trajectories. Here too there is an instrument that is now firmly incorporated into companies’ internal practices, namely the career development interview. However, the most recent assessments of its use and its effects in terms of information suggest that its impact is currently somewhat reduced [10]. Two other types of resources are also available. Accessing information independently still seems to be the prerogative of managerial staff and employees in intermediate occupations [11], even though, as we have already seen, the early uses of the “My Training Account” app seem to be reversing this tendency slightly. The career development advice scheme (*le Conseil en Évolution Professionnelle / CEP*) constitutes a third course of action that can help individuals, particularly the least well qualified, to identify more clearly the extent to which the skills they already possess will enable them to set their sights on careers in other occupations and to pinpoint the additional skills they will require for success. Céreq’s studies on the dynamics of the implementation of the CEP scheme in the French regions [12] have highlighted the decisive influence of local partnerships, whether formal or informal, that advisors forge with other organisations in order to respond to users’ needs, which sometimes have more to do with social integration than career development.

### #Lever 3: safeguarding trajectories through upskilling and internal mobility

Companies have at their disposal a third lever to activate for the benefit of their employees with the lowest levels of qualification, namely the mode of mobility management they are going to favour. A range of highly contrasting strategies can be observed. Some companies adapt to very high turnover rates, which are due mainly to the often difficult working conditions. Simply by adopting such a strategy, they are drastically reducing the opportunities for their employees to develop their skills internally. Other companies offer their employees basic forms of career trajectory safeguarding, such as expanding their skill sets

## 2 Career transitions: the relevant Céreq studies for understanding and analysing trajectories and tools

- [3] « La formation en entreprise accompagne les promotions mais fait défaut aux plus fragiles », E. Melnik-Olive, C. Stephanus, *Céreq Bref* n° 374, 2019.
- [7] « Valoriser les acquis de l'expérience, pour un usage renouvelé de la VAE », N. Beaupère, F. Kogut-Kubiak, N. Quintero, J. Urasadettan, *Céreq Bref*, n° 386, 2020.
- [8] « Le travail au cœur des apprentissages en entreprise », C. Fournier, M. Lambert, I. Marion-Vernoux, *Céreq Bref* n° 353, 2017.
- [9] « Regards comparatifs sur la formation en Europe : un plafond de verre du côté des entreprises françaises », A. Checcaglini, I. Marion-Vernoux, *Céreq Bref* n° 392, 2020.
- [10] « L'entretien professionnel peut-il contribuer au développement des compétences ? », C. Durieux, L. Baraldi in *L'entreprise rend-elle compétente ?* Céreq Essentiels 02, Céreq, 2021.
- [11] « Tous informés... tous formés ? », C. Brunet, G. Rieucan, *Céreq Bref* n° 378, 2019.
- [12] « Coopérer pour mieux orienter : zoom sur les pratiques locales des acteurs du CEP », A. d'Agostino, L. Baghioni, A. Legay, L. Gayraud, A. Valette-Wursthen, *Céreq Bref* n° 383, 2019.
- [13] « De l'influence du numérique sur les compétences dans les entrepôts de la logistique », M. Hocquelet, *Céreq Bref* n° 388, 2020.
- [14] « Les blocs de compétences dans le système français de certification professionnelle : un état des lieux », F. Amat et alii, *Céreq Echanges*, n° 4, 2017.
- [15] « La validation des qualifications : quelle place pour une régulation paritaire et interprofessionnelle ? » O. Liaroutzos, E. Sulzer, N. Besucco, F. Lozier, *Céreq Bref* n° 177, 2001.
- [16] « Observatoires prospectifs des métiers et des qualifications, l'âge de la maturité », A. Delanoé, N. Quintero, A. Valette-Wursthen, *Céreq Bref* n° 398, 2020.
- [17] *Evaluation des effets de l'accord national interprofessionnel de décembre 2013 sur les négociations des branches professionnelles*, Sémaphores & Céreq, synthèse du rapport final pour le CNEFP, déc. 2018.

### ➔ Learn more

- [1] *Les reconversions professionnelles*, F. Compain et B. Vivier, Avis du CESE 2021-08, 2021.
- [2] *Le travail non qualifié : permanences et paradoxes*, D. Meda & F. Vennat (dir). Coll. Recherches, La Découverte, 2005
- [4] *Clôture et bilan du dispositif d'accompagnement renforcé au retour à l'emploi des salariés de Mory Ducros et Mory Global*, P. Dole, Rapport de l'IGAS, 2020.
- [5] Bilan 2020 du Compte Personnel de Formation, Centre Inffo, *Inffo Formation* n°1000
- [6] *Compétences transférables et transversales : Quels outils de repérage de reconnaissance et de valorisation pour les individus et les entreprises ?*, France Stratégie, Réseau Emploi Compétences, 2017.
- [18] *Mutations industrielles et reconversion des salariés*, Villeval M.C., L'Harmattan, 1992.
- [19] *Anticiper et concerner les mutations - L'obligation triennale de négocier le dispositif de gestion prévisionnelle des emplois et des compétences*, H. Rouilleault, La Doc. Française, 2007.

and validating them through industry-level certifications. This has been the approach adopted notably in the warehouse and logistics sector in certain regions, with public authorities, labour market intermediaries and employers working together to develop and recognise the occupation of “multi-skilled logistics operative” [13]. While these processes enable employees working in low-level jobs as warehousemen or fork-lift truck operators to develop their skills, they also serve the economic interests of the companies concerned, which see them as a means to attract workers and increase employee loyalty, strategies that tend to be difficult to implement in this type of work.

### #Lever 4: bringing mobility management and certification systems into line with each others

A final lever is essential to give individuals a real ability to navigate their trajectories. It involves constructing a more homogenous and integrated vision of the vocational certification system that offers workers stabilised reference points as they construct their trajectories. The challenge here is to strengthen links between the various public and/or occupational reference frameworks in order to improve skill transferability. At the heart of

the debate is the currently ongoing work on units of competency [14]. Since 2014, all the vocational certifications listed in the French National Register of Vocational Certifications have had to be divided into “units” defined as “identified parts of a vocational certification”. Each unit can be the object of a specific validation process, thereby enabling individuals gradually to acquire a qualification. However, an additional issue has arisen, namely the need to consider the possibility that units linked to a specific certification can be recognised as possible components of a different certification. This plan to construct units common to several different certifications (already foregrounded by Céreq two decades ago [15]) requires an extensive programme of modification involving the various certification bodies (the National Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour, the occupational sectors and so on). Metaphorically speaking, therefore, the question is not so much to develop new bricks of competency but rather to place cement between the existing units. The cartography resulting from these exchanges will enable individuals to ground their professional development on recognised collective reference points, thereby facilitating the construction of their career trajectories. One interesting indication that this process is already under way is the steps being taken by numerous occupations and skills observatories (which support more than a hundred occupational sectors) to encourage collaboration among themselves, particularly on ways of developing bridges between the various sectors [16]

Clearly, the various approaches sketched out here will be seen as just so many fine words unless they are understood and appropriated by the actors in the training system. Even if they have more resources at their disposal, the most vulnerable individuals are also the most dependent on the strategic choices made by their employers. Consequently, they have and will always have difficulties in driving forward the construction of their own trajectories. In view of the weakness of company-level negotiations on training, it is at the level of the occupational sectors that the best prospects for the most comprehensive appropriation of the challenge of managing career transitions are to be found. The new cycle of collective bargaining at this level, which Céreq analysed as having been particularly active after the national intersectoral agreement of 2013 and the Act of 2014 [17], will have to be closely observed in this respect. Particular attention will also have to be paid to the way in which the OPCOs will be able to encourage the sectors they support to collaborate in this area. —●

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