



Camille STEPHANUS  
(Céreq)  
Josiane VERO  
(Céreq)

## Retraining is hard work! A survey of unskilled workers

The question of retraining lies at the heart of current employment policy issues. However, wanting to change occupation is no guarantee of completing a retraining programme, even less of finding a job. While low-skilled blue- and white-collar workers are the ones most likely to seek a change, they are also the ones who benefit least from a retraining programme. Workers' desires to retrain are also driven by different motivations depending on their socio-occupational category: it may be an enforced reaction to the ups and downs of working life, a rejection of downgrading and deteriorating working and employment conditions or a search for meaning.



OCCUPATIONAL  
RETRAINING  
ADULT TRAINING  
EMPLOYMENT SCHEME  
PCS -  
SOCIOPROFESSIONAL  
CLASSIFICATION  
DEFIS SURVEY  
CAPABILITIES  
APPROACH

Reforms of employment law and policies, as well as the collective bargaining system, are the arenas in which calls for retraining are made. The Act of 5 September 2018 on the Freedom to Choose One's Future Career and the Skills Investment Plan brought into action instruments that have been further strengthened by the Recovery Plan. Thus, since the summer of 2020, retraining programmes for shortage occupations or the occupations of the future have been a major element of the efforts being made to rebuild following the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and to deal with the digital and ecological transformations.

Such policy trends are prey to high levels of ambivalence inasmuch they fluctuate between a desire to make space for initiative and individual freedom (in keeping with the reforms undertaken since the beginning of the 2000s) and a concern to steer retraining programmes towards shortage occupations or occupations of the future. Thus considerable uncertainties remain as to the room for manoeuvre individuals, particularly unskilled blue- and white-collar workers, actually enjoy to move into new occupations and to benefit from such moves. The main targets of retraining policies, they are also being called on to become actors in their own working lives even though the pathways along which they might construct their careers are far from being mapped out. The health and economic crisis has made their situation more visible: at the heart of significant changes, they are being singled out and urged to adapt, get themselves trained and change jobs.

However, some of them were wanting to change occupation well before the crisis. The Defis survey, with its four-year observation period, enables us to take stock of individual pathways and to contextualise these aspirations in the original company in order to capture the dynamic within which the idea of retraining was forged and what the motivations, constraints and outcomes were in 2019.

In 2015, according to the Defis survey, 33% of all employees wanted to change occupation. Those in low-skilled jobs were the group most likely to be wanting a change, with 39% of them seeking a move, compared with 32% of skilled blue- and white-collar employees (SBC-SWCs) and 29% of those in the intermediate professions (IPs) and managerial positions (cadres). These intentions had not arisen out of nowhere. They reflected widespread dissatisfaction among workers with their employment situation. Although it is a decisive factor in shaping a desire to leave one's job, this dissatisfaction does not have a single cause; on the contrary, it varies in scope and nature depending on socio-occupational category. A desire to change job or occupation arises from one of three different motivations depending on whether the employee in question is in a low-skilled, averagely skilled or highly skilled position: it may constitute an enforced reaction to the ups and downs of working life, a rejection of downgrading and deteriorating working and employment conditions or, finally, a search for meaning and a more widespread desire for more free time to devote to one's personal life. Such are the results of three logistic regressions

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## 1 Measuring skill level

Employees are classified on the basis of the skill level of the job they hold: managerial and executive (cadre), intermediate profession, skilled white-collar, skilled blue-collar, low-skilled white-collar and low-skilled blue-collar. The job skill level was recorded in 2015 at the time of the first wave of the Defis survey when respondents were voicing their career aspirations for the next five years. The occupation recorded at that time was categorised initially according to INSEE's PCS-ESE classification. The distinction between managerial and executive, intermediate profession, white-collar and skilled and low-skilled blue-collar is based on Olivier Chardon's classification (*La qualification des employés, Insee, document de travail, n° F 0202, 2002*).

(cf. [Annexe 1 in the online supplement](#)). There are a number of different ways to start an investigation into retraining

### Low-skilled blue- and white-collar workers: when jobs are at stake

For workers employed in low-skilled jobs, the idea of retraining is usually forged when difficulties are encountered in the labour market, e.g. in the event of a massive upheaval caused by a social plan or redundancy programme or the experience of precarity, particularly when it goes hand in hand with pluriactivity. A desire to change occupation may also be expressed when the share of an employee's basic salary is reduced in order to make way for a variable share based on performance. In this case, therefore, the desire to retrain is more a matter of security linked to the current job and wage. Several signals tend to show that it is when a job is at stake that the time to think of retraining has arrived, that is to say in a constrained situation or defensive position. Employees are less likely to embark on a retraining programme as a purely preventive measure, in the absence of any threat to their jobs or in response to deteriorating working and employment conditions.

However, it is all the easier to throw oneself into a retraining programme when the employer has drawn up an employment protection plan that includes a reclassification plan. This plan must contain measures such as training, validation of knowledge acquired through experience (VKE) and retraining programmes in order to facilitate employee reclassification, whether internally or externally. It is usually in such a context that low-skilled blue- and white-collar workers are motivated to consider retraining. They are also more likely to do so if they work in the hotel and catering or construction sectors<sup>1</sup>.

### Skilled blue- and white-collar workers: when work and its recognition and organisation are at stake

For skilled blue- and white-collar workers, the situation is more nuanced. The desire to change job or occupation is less likely to erupt suddenly, when a redundancy plan is drawn up, for example. Nevertheless, as for low-skilled blue- and white-collar workers, the wish to train for a new occupation also emerges out of a rejection of precarity and experience of fixed-term jobs. While there are as many reasons for wanting to leave an occupation as there are individuals, for skilled blue- and white-collar workers the motivations generally cluster around work itself and the recognition thereof: the impression of not being paid sufficiently well given the work they do or a feeling that they are overqualified for the jobs they are currently doing. Such a feeling of downgrading or loss of status reflects a gap between an individual's skill level and the job currently held. Highly skilled jobs are being created, but at a slower pace than the quickening flow of graduates leaving our universities. Some of these graduates are having to accept jobs requiring lower qualifications than those they have obtained in the education system. The triggering events also usually have something to do with working conditions reminiscent of Tayloristic work practices: when employees carry out monotonous, repetitive tasks, have to work in arduous conditions or when they have a health problem that prevents them from accomplishing certain tasks on a long-term basis. And finally, another important motivation is being better able to reconcile work and personal life. These are all motivations that do not come to the fore as absolute priorities for workers in low-skilled jobs.

## 2 Employees' views of working and employment conditions in 2015

Share of employees concerned by	LSBC-LSWC	SBC-SWC	Managers-IP
Repetitive work	80%	64%*	32%
A feeling they are underpaid in view of the work they do	61%	41%*	48%
A job not commensurate with their qualifications	37%	26%*	17%
A change in the management team	30%	28%*	37%*
Difficulties in reconciling work and personal life	22%	21%	29%*
A health problem/handicap that prevents them from holding down a job on a long-term basis	17%	13%*	5%*
Frequent boredom at work	14%	12%	7%*
Fixed-term job	9%	6%*	4%

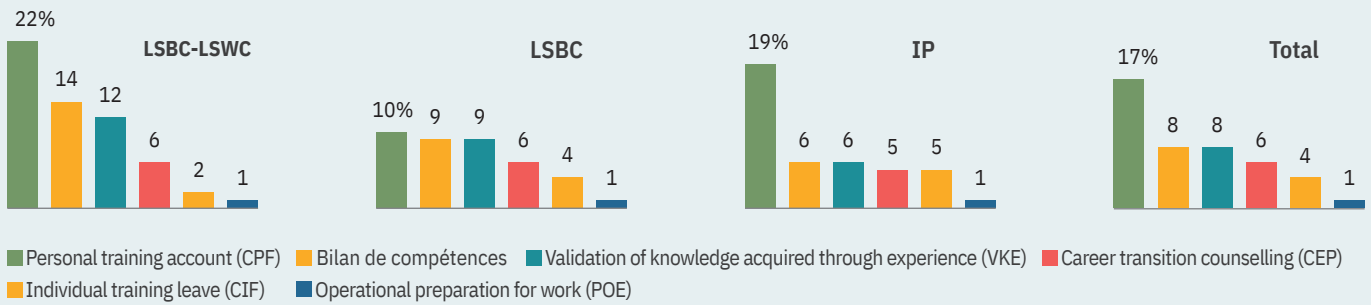
ENQ: employé non qualifié. EQ: employé qualifié. ONQ : ouvrier non qualifié. OQ: ouvrier qualifié. PI: profession intermédiaire. LSWC: low-skilled white-collar SBC: skilled white-collar LSBC: low-skilled blue-collar SBC: skilled blue-collar. IP: intermediate profession M: managerial and executive. Source: CNEFP-France compétences-Céreq, dispositif Defis- enquêtes 2015. **Scope:** all employees in the Defis employees field employed in the same company between December 2013 and summer 2015. Example: 80% of LSBC-LSWCs stated they did repetitive work in 2015, compared with 64% of SBC-SWCs and 32% of Managers-PIs. \*All other things being equal, doing repetitive work increases the probability of wanting to change occupation for SBC-SWCs. This is not the case for LSBC-LSWCs or for managerial and executive staff.



### Managers (cadres) and intermediate professionals: when what is at stake is an anticipated risk of job loss and a search for meaning

For managerial staff and intermediate professionals, the desire to change jobs or occupation does not emerge in exactly the same context. Although, objectively, they are less affected by unemployment and less exposed to unfavourable working and employment conditions,

### 3 The use of retraining support measures 2015 and 2019



**LSWC:** low-skilled white-collar **SWC:** skilled white-collar **LSBC:** low-skilled blue-collar **SBC:** skilled blue-collar **IP:** intermediate profession.

**Source:** CNEFP-France compétences-Céreq, dispositif Defis-enquêtes 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019. **Scope:** all employees in the Defis field who remained in the same company between December 2013 and the summer of 2015 and seeking to change job or occupation in 2015 (excluding retirees). **Example:** 22% of the LSWC-LSBCs who wished to change occupation in 2015 undertook a training course funded by their personal training accounts between 2015 and 2019.



they are more aware of the changes taking place in their company. These changes may appear to them as risks or threats to their jobs and lead them to consider retraining as a preventive measure. This is more likely to be the case when there is a change in the management team or when they believe they are at risk of losing their jobs even though the company is in a healthy position. These categories of employees seem more likely than the others to plan for and manage their retraining. The significant situations that appear to prompt a wish to retrain are also more likely to be connected to disparities between individual aspirations and the work itself: to look for more interesting work, to work less frequently on a just-in-time basis or to stop their work conflicting with their personal lives seem to be important motivations. All these factors lead us to suppose that such about-turns have more to do with a search for personal development - in essence, a search for a job and a life that have meaning. These situations are more likely to be observed in the finance, insurance and real estate sectors.

One surprising finding is that it is the least qualified workers who are both the most exposed to deteriorating working and employment conditions and, paradoxically, the least inclined to think of retraining in response (Table 2; see also Annexe 2 in the [online supplement](#)). In fact, they are more likely to be doing repetitive work (80%), to regard themselves as inadequately remunerated for the work they do (61%), to be in a job that does not match their skill or qualification level (37%), to have difficulties reconciling their personal lives and their work (22%), to have a health problem that prevents them from holding down a job on a long-term basis (14%) or to be in a temporary job (9%). And yet, these increased difficulties do not trigger a desire to retrain, whereas they push other employees into seeking a change of job or occupation. Such a finding is suggestive of a phenomenon known as adaptive preference. Low-skilled blue- and white-collar workers seem more likely to internalise the constraints, thereby hampering their capacity to aspire to better things.

Between retraining as a “voluntary” endeavour and retraining as an imperative with which those concerned have to come to terms, the various socio-occupational categories do not embark on their retraining projects from the same starting line. If their capability to aspire is unequal and workers in low-skilled jobs adapt their preferences, why is this so?

Just as the plans target the future, so they are largely a product of the expected benefits. To what extent do low-skilled workers take advantage of retraining programmes? How many chaotic and failed attempts are there for every successful retraining effort?

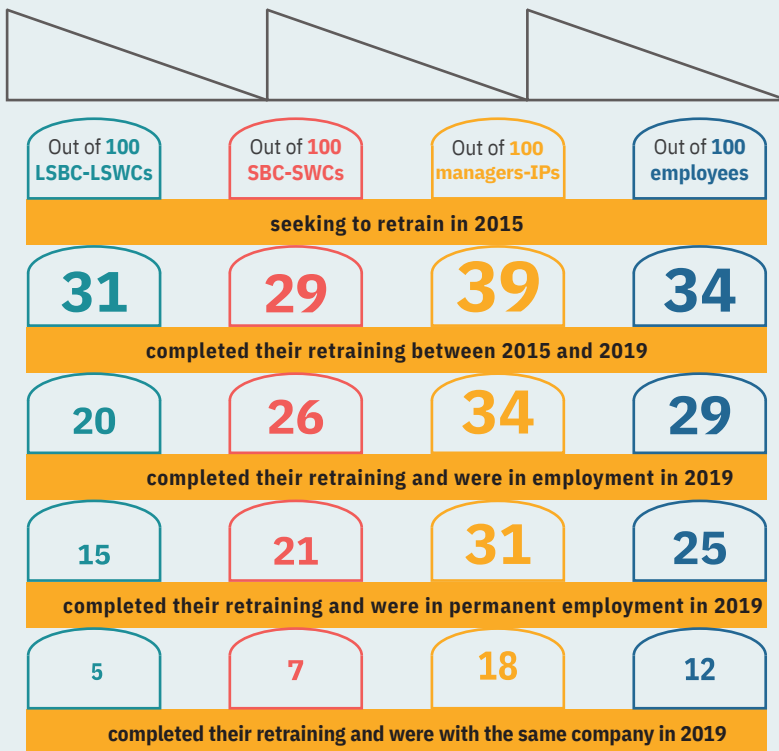
#### Retraining and returning to work: uneven prospects depending on socio-occupational category

In 2015, 33 out of every 100 employees wanted to change job or occupation. Four years later, 10 of them had completed their retraining, 9 were in a job, 7 were in stable employment and 4 were still with their original company. These five figures trace out a turnaround that is difficult to negotiate. It was employees in low-skilled jobs who were most eager to retrain but they were also the ones who were most likely to fail in this endeavour. For them, a change of occupation is less likely to go hand in hand with access to employment, particularly stable employment, and is usually achieved through external mobility.

The highest retraining success rates are, after all, observed among employees in the most highly skilled jobs, although the differences between the categories remain relatively small: between 2015 and 2019, 39% of managers and IPs wishing to retrain did so successfully, compared with 29% of SBC-SWCs and 31% of LSBC-LSWCs (Table 4).

On the other hand, at the end of a retraining programme, a key question remains, namely that of the return to employment. This is an issue where the inequalities are more pronounced: in 2019, scarcely one LSBC-LSWC in five seeking to

#### 4 Employees' retraining trajectories between 2015 and 2019



LSWC: low-skilled white-collar SWC: skilled white-collar LSBC: low-skilled blue-collar  
 SBC: skilled blue-collar IP: intermediate profession  
 Source: CNEFP-France compétences-Céreq, dispositif Defis-enquêtes 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019.  
**Scope:** all employees in the Defis field who remained in the same company between December 2013 and the summer of 2015 and seeking to change job or occupation in 2015 (excluding retirees). **Example:** 31% of LSWC-LSBCs seeking to retrain in 2015 completed their retraining between 2015 and 2019.



and 2019, that is to say changed occupation within the same company compared with just 7% of SWC-SBCs and 5% of LSWC-LSBCs. The latter category was 3.5 times less likely to complete an internal retraining programme than managers and IPs. A change of company is their principal mode of occupational mobility (Table 4).

— Findings such as these call into question the opportunities and room for manoeuvre low-skilled blue- and white-collar workers enjoy when it comes to retraining. They echo the CESE finding of unequal access to long retraining programmes and point to some possible solutions, through a strengthening of actual rights to ambitious training programmes designed as preventive measures unrelated to the employer's right to make employees redundant. If every worker is being called on to become "an actor in their own professional development" and to shoulder the responsibility for it, this will require them to have at their disposal the means to assume such a responsibility. It is not the role of workers alone to make such means available; employers, the social partners and public institutions must also be involved. The Act of 5 September 2018 and the Skills Investment Plan have brought into play new support and training measures. The urgency resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a redeployment of collective and individual measures, the most recent being the so-called collective transitions (TransCo). Their effects will have to be assessed at some point in the future. At the same time the question arises of the return to employment. While recruitment in more and more occupations is becoming increasingly difficult, many workers are not managing to find a job on completion of their retraining. The majority of them are low-skilled blue- and white-collar workers. Not all the social categories suffer equally the consequences of the lack of jobs as measured by Dares, the research and statistical section of the French Ministry of Labour: in the third quarter of 2021, the number of jobseekers exceeded vacancies in France by a factor of 13. While there is not room in the labour market for everyone, it is just as essential to put in place an ambitious training policy for those seeking to retrain as it is to promote the creation of sustainable jobs in order to take up the challenge of unemployment among the least well qualified. —●

#### → Learn more

[1] [Des reconversions aux transitions : un nouvel âge des mobilités professionnelles ?](#), D. Brochier, Céreq Bref, n° 405, 2021.

[2] [Les reconversions professionnelles](#), F. Compain & B. Vivier, CESE, Avis 2021-08, mars 2021.

[3] [Demandeurs d'emploi inscrits à Pôle emploi au 3e trimestre 2021](#), D. Le Ninivin, DARES Indicateurs, n° 58, Octobre 2021.

[4] [Les emplois vacants](#), DARES, Données, 15 décembre 2021.

[5] [Les tensions sur le marché du travail en 2019](#), DARES Résultats, n° 32, octobre 2020.

retrain had completed their retraining and was in a job, compared with one SBC-SWC in four and one manager or IP in three (Table 4).

Access to stable employment is even more selective and unequal. LSWCs and LSBCs were only half as likely as managers to complete a retraining programme and be in permanent employment in 2019 (Table 4).

Staying with the original employer after completing a desired retraining programme follows the same trend but further widens the gap between the socio-occupational categories. Managers and IPs are more likely to move jobs internally following a change of occupation: 18% of those who wished to retrain in 2015 did so internally between 2015

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Publications manager:

Florence Lefresne

Translation:

Andrew Wilson

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Centre d'études et de recherches sur les qualifications  
 10, place de la Joliette CS 21321 - 13567 Marseille Cedex 02 / T. +33 (0)4 91 13 28 28  
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