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Between giving up and launching the project: career change plans challenged by the crisis

An event as unprecedented as it was unexpected, the health crisis interfered with employees' plans for career change. How did they come to terms with this situation? In particular, what happened to blue-collar workers, or more broadly the least skilled categories? The qualitative section of the [Impact](#) survey, carried out by Céreq in 2021, reveals the effects of the crisis depending on the stage the career change plans had reached. Between giving up and persevering at all costs, this Training & Employment analyses the ways in which career change plans were conceived and put into practice in a period of crisis.



Career change
Professional project
Health crisis
Professional training
IMPACT Survey
DEFIS Survey

The health crisis has profoundly affected the world of work since it first erupted in March 2020. While the short-time working scheme helped to mitigate its impact on employment [1], an increase in the number of contracts terminated has been observed in the sectors most seriously affected [2]. Furthermore, organisational restructurings and changes, hastened by the crisis, have led not only to involuntary mobilities but also to instability in individuals' employment situations [3]. The repercussions on individual career trajectories, whether already at work or to come in the future, have resurrected some of the problems around career change plans, notably for the least skilled groups. These workers, who are more likely to be on precarious contracts, are, after all, at greater risk than others of enforced severance and tend to be less satisfied with their employment situation. Although they are more likely than the more skilled categories to express a desire to change occupation, they enjoy less access to training [4] and experience greater difficulty in putting their plans for a career change into practice [5]. How did the crisis facilitate the implementation of some career change plans or, conversely, hinder their realisation, particularly for the least skilled? The [Impact](#) survey, carried out by Céreq in the spring of 2021, provides the beginnings of an answer to this question.

According to the survey's statistical section, 17% of employees were planning to change occupation in 2020-2021 and 23% to change employer, while 70% of these were planning to make both changes. Furthermore, 40% of employees were planning

to undertake training. For almost two thirds of employees who had a more or less clearly defined plan, the crisis had effects that were more often reported as negative than favourable. Over and above these general tendencies, the qualitative section of the survey has enabled us to examine in greater detail the different ways in which the crisis situation affected these plans.

Four typical situations emerge from the crisis

The interviews we conducted reveal the effects of the health crisis on the processes of career change, which varied depending on the stage individual plans had reached. After all, the planning of a career change encompasses the conception phase (which some sociologists describe as the "latency" phase), the formulation and decision-making phase (deliberation) and the implementation phase (branching out), and extends as far as a renewed commitment to a new occupation [6] [7]. Characterised by considerable toing-and-froing, gradual adjustments and reconsiderations depending on the various stages, a career change is not a linear process. It is linked, on the one hand, to the previous career pathway, to the origins of the plan and the factors that triggered it, to the career objectives and the degree to which they are clearly defined, to the risks to be taken and to individuals' personal situations (notably their material and relational circumstances, available time and other resources). However, it also depends on the situation in the company and its training and human resource management practices (work

1 The Impact survey

The Impact survey (Impact de la crise sanitaire sur les Mobilités, les Projets, les Aspirations professionnelles, les Compétences et le Travail/Impact of the Health Crisis on Mobility, Plans, Career Aspirations, Skills and Work), comprising a statistical and a qualitative section, was carried out by Céreq between March and May 2021. It was supported financially by Dares, the research and statistical directorate of the French Ministry of Labour, as part of an invitation to tender for collective interdisciplinary research projects on “The impact of the health crisis on skills and vocational training 2nd wave”. It was based on the DEFIS training and employee trajectory surveys carried out by Céreq from 2015 to 2019 in partnership with France compétences. The DEFIS sample is representative of all employees who were working during the month of December 2013 in companies with 10 and more employees in the market sector.

The statistical section of the Impact survey contains 2,728 respondents, of whom 2,340 were in employment in March 2020. The sample for the qualitative section was selected in several stages on the basis of prior consent for an interview obtained in 2019. Preselection centred on those individuals who, at first glance, had low skill levels, in view either of the job held in 2019 or their level of diploma as recorded in the DEFIS survey. The selection process was subsequently refined with the responses obtained to the open question asked in the 2019 DEFIS survey on individuals’ career plans for the next 5 years: in the first place, plans for a career move or to establish a business, as well as other career development plans, for example putting into effect a vocational qualification obtained or further career development within the present company. Other selection criteria, including age, sex, employment situation at the end of 2019 and geographical location, were adopted in order to diversify the interviewees’ profiles. In all, 20 in-depth interviews (lasting from 20 minutes for the individual with less than perfect French to almost an hour and a half on average for the others) were conducted by telephone because of the health restrictions between March and May 2021.

The interviewees’ profiles were divided between 9 men (average age 45) and 11 women (average age 44), the youngest being 27 and the oldest 54. Several regions and departments were represented as well as towns and cities of various sizes and rural communities. The vast majority of the interviewees had no qualification higher than a lower secondary certificate or, at best, an initial education qualification no higher than a CAP/BEP (the lowest level of vocational qualification), except for one business worker employee with a BTS (a 2-year post-secondary qualification) and a graduate with 5 years’ post-secondary education working in a precarious job as a call centre agent. At the time of the survey, they were all in work in a range of different sectors and with a variety of different employment statuses, except for one inactive individual on maternity leave. Those on fixed-term contracts or employed as temporary agency workers remained registered with Pôle emploi, the French public employment service.

Of the 20 individuals interviewed, 8 had experienced a period of short-time working in various sectors (construction, transport, sales, service, state education). Four female employees had had experience of teleworking during the health crisis: a purchasing assistant, a stock exchange employee, a hotline technician and a civil service administrator.

The semi-structured interview protocol comprised several thematic sections: presentation of the individual and their career trajectory, of their current employment situation and their plans for career development and/or career change, knowledge and experience in terms of training and support and personal and work-related experience since March 2020, i.e. a sort of review or assessment of the past year.

* Names have been changed.

environment and organisation, access to training and informational resources, management of employee mobility).

The survey enabled us to identify four typical situations in which the effects of the crisis on the career change processes made themselves felt. In the first, they constituted an obstacle to individuals’ plans, in the second, they forced those affected to defer their plans, in the third they provided an opportunity to implement the

plans and in the fourth they enabled individuals to pursue the process.

An obstacle to the process

Here, the crisis halted the career change plan and led the employees in question to cast doubt on their plans or even, particularly in the case of those whose plans were in the “latency” phase, to abandon them altogether.

For many, the anxieties and difficulties engendered by the crisis further reinforced the priority they attach to job security over pursuing their career change plans, now judged to be risky. “To take the plunge” or “to accept the challenge” was to take a risk that some were unable or unwilling to agree to. As M. Carmet* (age 51, initial training: vocational certificate in winegrowing and vocational baccalaureate in commerce and service, cellarman for a reputable company for 25 years) explains: “*And then, it’s a lack of courage, because you’re afraid of the unknown, and when you don’t have the education or training, taking a step in the dark, sometimes, it’s very hard. All things considered, we’ve got good working conditions and decent wages, so it’s difficult to give it all up.*”

These employees appear to have internalised a deterioration in the labour market, leading them to reconsider their career options in the light of their relative material security. Between obtaining a job “at all costs” regardless of field and conditions and retaining one’s current job, the actual work content seems to have been downplayed or even excised altogether. The crisis led these individuals to put into context those aspects of their own work situation with which they were dissatisfied (arduous working conditions, lack of recognition, feeling of being undervalued, etc.): “*you know what you might lose, but you don’t know what you’re going to find*”. Despite this dissatisfaction, some even ended up regarding themselves as “lucky” or “resigned” and resolving “ultimately to settle for very little”.

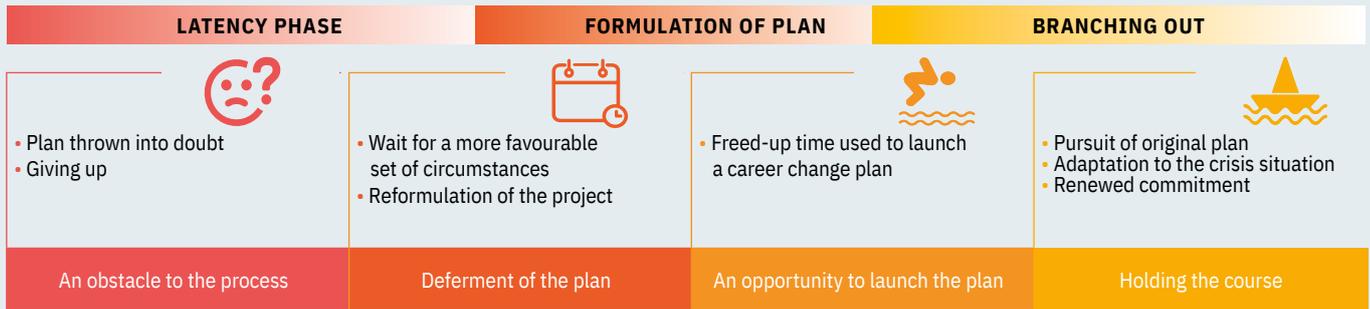
Social isolation, age, a career already well advanced, low levels of qualification, as well as the sacrifices required by personal and family situations and uncertain employment prospects, are all blocking factors whose effects were exacerbated by the crisis.

Deferment of the plan

In this scenario, pursuance of the process was deferred to a period more favourable to the operationalisation of the career change plan and to putting it into action. It might be a question of waiting for the “peripheral” obstacles (such as the family constraints complicating a geographical move) to be removed or for the activity in question to resume (particularly in the sectors affected by the health crisis, such as construction and tourism).

In some cases, putting the career change plan on hold was seen as a temporary pause that did not vitiate its essential nature. Having already been thought through or even tried out beforehand, it was

2 Typical situations observed during the health crisis by plan's progress status



Source: Céreq, Impact 2021. 



simply put on hold because of the instability that, in the short term, limited the prospects for career development. This was the case for M. Nisbet (aged 39, former security guard working as a site foreman/heating installer, without formal qualifications), whose aim was to set himself up as a self-employed plumber and heating engineer. The crisis led him to put his future career on hold; although it added an element of uncertainty, it did not change his initial idea: *“Let’s wait until the crisis is over, and then when everything has returned to normal, we’ll start all over again calmly and collectedly.”*

In other cases, the career plans were adjusted or even reformulated, notably because of the lasting consequences of the crisis for the evolution of the target industry or occupation. This was the case, for example, for M. Felix (aged 49, qualified refrigeration and air conditioning technician, refrigeration fitter on a permanent contract for 30 years), who was no longer considering the same possible prospects in the international tourism and travel agencies. Because of his trade union activities, he was instead focusing on the possible alternative career of labour inspector, while putting off implementing his plan until a point in the not too distant future in order to avoid disrupting his child’s life (he is a single parent).

An opportunity to put the plan into practice

In this scenario, the crisis, and in particular the increased availability created by the extended period of short-time working, constituted an opportunity to re-invigorate the career change process. The periods of reduced hours favoured the deliberation phase (honing the plan, making the decision) and made it possible to initiate the branching-out phase. For some, this time freed up during normal working hours made it easier for them to access training. This was the case for M^{me} Ferrier (aged 40, living with a partner, one child, sales assistant-beautician on a permanent contract in a large group), who saw this as an opportunity to embark on the process of validating her acquired experience* in order to obtain a BTS (senior technician’s certificate) that would qualify her for a career change as a teacher in a beauty therapy school. Other not insignificant factors came together to encourage this move, including professional support (her employer’s support for skill development measures) and a loosening of certain

family constraints. She had been mulling her plan over beforehand, but the crisis helped to cement her decision: *“... I began the process after the first lockdown, it had been running through my mind for a long time, that is to continue working in the same occupation but as a teacher. And to that end I had made some enquiries in schools and had already applied to ... beauty therapy schools, but I needed the BTS, which I didn’t have. I didn’t talk to my employer about it but I had to take certain steps in order to have my prior experience validated, and I said to myself this is the right year to do it because we’ve shut down, we’ve got less work because of the lockdown, ... and so I got started on the process.”*

Holding the course

This scenario groups together those individuals who during the crisis continued pursuing a change of direction on which they had previously embarked. The process may have been affected at various stages. For those individuals already settled in a new job or allocated new responsibilities, the crisis may have influenced their relationship to work (by affecting their working conditions) but not their career plan, since it was only recently that it had been put into practice. For those who had embarked on a training course, the effects were ambivalent. The lockdown was used to complete the training; moreover, when the training programme was provided in-house, the period of inactivity also increased the availability of tutors. Nevertheless, the introduction of protective measures or safety precautions certainly made work-based training more complicated, as M^{me} Rodriguez (aged 47, married, two children, vocational baccalaureate in health and safety, had just completed her training on an upskilling contract) testified: *“... You have to understand that when you’re working on an engine and you have to hold something and your colleague comes up right beside you ... you can’t stay 1.5 metres apart from each other, the engine is just 30 centimetres wide. There are some things that you just can’t do despite everything.”* The sudden changeover to distance learning was also a destabilising factor (family situations to be managed, difficult isolation in some cases, lack of digital tools and skills). Family and learning support, as well as the adjustments made by training organisations, were an essential resource for holding the course. Generally

VAE = validation des acquis de l’expérience.

Résultats complets à retrouver dans le rapport d’études sur www.cereq.fr

Céreq études, no 37, *Quels effets de la crise sanitaire sur les projets et aspirations professionnels ?*

A. d’Agostino, C. Galli, E. Melnik-Olive (dir.), 2022.



➔ Further reading

[1] « [Le recours à l'activité partielle atténue l'impact de la crise sur l'emploi](#) »,

O. PINOL, S. LEVASSEUR, *Insee Conjoncture*, February 2021, 4 p.

[2] « [Crise sanitaire : quels sont les secteurs et les territoires les plus concernés par les plans de sauvegarde de l'emploi ?](#) », J. Ghraïni, *Dares Focus*, July 2021, n° 35, 4 p.

[3] « [Que font les restructurations aux parcours des salariés ?](#) », E. Melnik-Olive, C. Stephanus, *Socio-Economie du Travail*, 2019/1, n° 5, p. 99-133.

[4] « [La formation en entreprise face aux aspirations des salariés](#) », J.-M. Dubois, E. Melnik-Olive, *Céreq Bref*, n° 357, 2017, 4 p.

[5] « [Se reconvertir, c'est du boulot ! Enquête sur les travailleurs non qualifiés](#) », C. Stéphanus, J. Vero, *Céreq Bref*, n° 418, 2022.

[6] « [Les conditions individuelles et collectives des ruptures professionnelles](#) », S. Denave, *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, n° 120, 2006, p. 85-110.

[7] « [Entre contrainte et choix, regards sur les reconversions professionnelles subies et les reconversions professionnelles volontaires](#) », C. Negroni, O. Mazade, *Recherche & Formation*, 2019/1 n° 90, p. 87-102.

speaking, the training pathway was usually seen as a pathway for fighters: “*it was a lengthy process, but you had to be able to fight your way through it*”.

Crisis catalyses obstacles for the least skilled

Several instruments were rapidly deployed in order to mitigate the social and economic consequences of the crisis (extension of the short-time working scheme, strengthening of the *FNE Formation* scheme through which the state provides financial assistance to companies impacted by the crisis that wish to upgrade their employees' skills, introduction of distance learning). Nevertheless, the crisis did create additional obstacles to training and job searches which, for the least skilled categories, catalysed the already familiar barriers to career changes. These obstacles, which exist because of the difficulties experienced in mobilising the instruments and resources required to support the plan, may be individual in nature (advanced age and career stage, personal situation, isolation) and/or linked to the person's job (type of contract, work environment and organisation) and to the employer's practices, which may be more or less supportive of career development. By creating greater uncertainty and further stretching social ties, the crisis made it even more difficult to put career plans into practice.

●— The survey has revealed that the crisis had two categories of effects on career change plans. Firstly, the economic situation and the difficulties specific to certain sectors had an impact on the very nature of the plans (abandonment of plan to go self-employed or to seek work in a sector heavily affected by the crisis, for example). Secondly, the crisis situation may have further complicated implementation of the plans, that is the process of putting them into practice and mobilising the necessary resources, particularly training. Whether or not the plans were pursued was determined by how well defined and advanced they were: the less definite they were, the less they were regarded as a priority during this period.

In the career change plans, training was perceived as a prior stage requiring serious commitment and risk taking, as well as a factor in revitalising personal and biographical trajectories. Nevertheless, poorly

informed or socially isolated individuals who had not clearly defined their plan did not perceive it as a key factor.

As far as employees' access to training was concerned, the company's role depended heavily on its HR practices in this area. In some, they were highly developed, but in others they were limited to the provision of information on personal training accounts (much requested by employees) and in many cases were perceived as non-existent by our respondents. None of the 20 employees interviewed said they had benefited from the *FNE Formation* programmes or had been informed about them. The crisis situation, with all the adjustments it required employers to make, seems to have left little room for the organisation and implementation of career development plans in companies.

Finally, the survey shows that the health crisis was an opportune time for individuals to question their relationship to work and employment. Job security was a cross-cutting concern and frequently emerged as a key factor in these times of crisis. In this respect, the results of the qualitative and quantitative surveys concur: it was one of the three most cited factors in response to the question intended to ascertain “what emerged as most important from the crisis”, after the work-life balance and working conditions respectively. For the least skilled categories, it was actually the second most important factor and the most important one for the unemployed (cf. digital supplement).

Signed by the social partners on 15 October 2021, the inter-occupational framework agreement that aims to adapt the Act On The Freedom To Choose One's professional future places expanded access to retraining schemes and incentives for firms to offer their employees training at the heart of the negotiations to come in the future. Facilitating employees' access, particularly the least skilled, to the resources required to promote career development is acknowledged as a key issue. Improving job security and working conditions, which gained in importance during this crisis period, also emerge as key factors to be taken into account in responding to career aspirations, notably those of the least skilled. —●

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