

LINKING THE PAST WITH THE PRESENT: OLD AND NEW SOLUTIONS FOR REDUNDANT WORKERS IN WALLONIA

Wallonia was once a rich and booming region. Renowned especially for its coal and steel industry, the area experienced a strong industrial growth since the Middle Ages. For many years, heavy industry was the driving force behind the region's economy. Indeed, Wallonia was the birthplace of the industrial revolution in Western Europe.

Today, this is no longer the case. The profitability of heavy industry already started to decline in the first half of the 20th century, which saw the centre of industrial activity shift to the northern part of Belgium. The crisis in the steel industry led to a painful process of economic restructuring and offshoring of production including to eastern and Asian countries. In fact, every year, hundreds of enterprises in Wallonia are forced to restructure their operations, move abroad or, in the worst cases, cease production and close down. The social consequences of collective redundancies are tragic: when a company closes down, workers' personal plans for their future fade away and his/her situation often becomes critical financially and psychologically. How should such large scale redundancies be dealt with? How can effective support strategies and retraining be delivered?

In order to give an answer to these dramatic questions, the Walloon government together with Forem (the office for vocational training and employment) and trade unions came up, at the end of the seventies, with a valuable instrument. The so called PAR (Reconversion Support Plan) set up by the government foresaw the creation of temporary Reconversion Units, led by trade unions representative and counsellors, conceived to help, support and guide workers who lost their jobs. For more than twenty years, these Units have assisted thousands of workers made redundant from their jobs in many different sectors: the glass industry, the aeronautic sector, textiles, metal working, chemicals, energy, agriculture, construction, and the ICT sector...

Nevertheless, the Reconversion Support Plan was often criticised in the past for being inefficient and lacking strategic planning. In other words, the Units were seen as "ad hoc" measures, lacking the ability to anticipate developments and therefore co-ordinate their measures. In this context, *Decrire* has been working since 2002 to make the Reconversion Units an effective means of providing successful solutions to workers affected by redundancies. The EQUAL project is led by Le Forem in collaboration with the main Belgian trade unions (FGTB and CSC), TEF (the work, employment and training centre of the Free University of Brussels), CEFRET (the training centre for the textile sector composed by trade unions and employer organisations) and other partners such as the education centre CEPAG, and the non-profit organisations SOS Depannage and Lire&Ecire.

As Anny Poncin, coordinator Le Forem of the project says: "*the EQUAL initiative has been extremely helpful as it has allowed us to improve and perfect an existing tool, which was very valuable in theory but not really effective in reality. Decrire has enabled the conception of a clear definition of what a Reconversion Unit is: its mandate, objectives, management as well as the role and functions of the key partners. In this way, the potential of this tool could be maximised and the theory transformed into concrete solutions on the ground*".

OLD IDEAS, NEW SOLUTIONS: THE EXAMPLE OF ARTLAINE

What exactly is a Reconversion Unit? What are the methods put in place to support workers, to ensure their professional retraining and to foster their mobility?

First of all, the Reconversion Unit is a venue, a landmark situated in a neutral place, close to the workers but also to the closing company. A Reconversion Unit is set up at the request of trade

union representatives within a company at the time of its closure and following some preparatory meetings between Le Forem, the workers and the employers of the company.

The Reconversion Unit is intended to be a place of conviviality and solidarity where workers can come at all times, speak with advisers of Le Forem, check job vacancies, use computers, follow training courses and meet with former colleagues. For example, the Reconversion Unit Artlaine was set up in February 2005 following the closure of a number of textile companies in Mouscron, a city near the French border. The Mouscron area has been one of the major centres for textile production in Belgium since the XIX century. It is also a sector which, in the last three decades, has been severely affected by drastic workforce reductions. To give a clear picture of the situation, nowadays there are about 4000 individuals employed in the textile sector in Wallonia - one third less than the total workforce employed in the sector in the seventies! Since February 2005, 13 companies in the textile sector have closed down in Mouscron, leaving 452 workers jobless.

These workers have benefited from the activities of Artlaine and from the help of 2 career advisors (technical agents from Le Forem) and 2 social counsellors (trade union representatives) working in the Unit. As Marlyne Decroix, career advisor of the Forem within Artlaine, explains: *"Our role is to look at everyone's situation, analyse how the particular individual deals with the layoff and the 'mourning period' which inevitably follows the loss of their job. We help each of them to get through this painful transition period as well as possible"*. The ultimate purpose is to set up a tailor made reconversion plan, adapted to the needs and career expectation of everyone. But how are these plans established?

Through several individual meetings with the career advisors of Le Forem, the redundant workers are stimulated to draw up a professional training path believed to foster their professional mobility and increase their opportunities for finding a new job. The first step is an assessment of the worker's competences, skills and requirements. As Marlyne explains further: *"we ask each worker to rate himself in relation to four dimensions: awareness of himself and of his professional aspirations, knowledge of his skills and competences awareness of the tools and techniques that can be used for finding a new job and last but not least, the perception of possible psychological barriers, family or health problems. The goal of this kind of assessment is to check if the worker is ready to find new employment or if he needs some support from the Unit to foster his professional reinsertion"*.

If some training needs are identified, the career advisor of Le Forem together with the beneficiary define a clear training path aiming to enhancing the worker's skills, or, sometimes, to guide his/her reconversion to another profession. For example, after having undertaken an assessment with the career advisors of Le Forem, five women have decided to return to formal education and pursue a course to become auxiliary nurses. Today they are far from being disappointed from their choice. As Sabine Tas, an former textile workers aged 39, says :*"I left school when I was 17 and from that moment I have always worked within the textile sector. Then, last year, the enterprise where I was working closed down and that's how I've been introduced to the Artlaine Reconversion Unit. For me the reconversion path and collaboration with the career advisors worked well from the beginning as it is not easy to find one's way when you loose your job. As I had no diploma, I had to start everything from scratch..."*. And Sylvianne Decock, aged 37, added: *"Today we are doing something we like, we go to the courses with a new determination. We are all more motivated and our morale is high. Loosing our job was, in the end, a lucky break!"*.

DISCOVERING NEW PASSIONS AND PROFESSIONS...

Professional reconversion can be easier for some but more complicated for others. How to discover new new career paths if you have spent your entire working life in the same sector?

The project *Decrire la convertibilité* has come up with two solutions to answer that problem. First of all, information sessions are organised for beneficiaries, at their request, within the Units. Representative from the most disparate sectors (logistics, agriculture, temporary work, services...) come to the Unit and illustrate the activities, jobs and functions within these businesses, answering the questions of the audience.

The second solution envisaged by the EQUAL project and tested in Artlaine is a new method called "company shadowing", a very simple technique but nonetheless innovative. The starting point of this practice is a detailed analysis of the industrial zone surrounding the Unit: what are the enterprises active within the zone? What are these enterprises doing? What kind of jobs can these enterprises offer? This information is then shared with the beneficiaries. In addition, on-site visits are organised for those who are interested. In this way, the redundant workers have a chance to look more closely at new business activities, and understand and discover unknown professions. In parallel to these activities, the career advisors of Le Forem organise sessions with the workers to explain the transferability of their professional skills into other sectors.

As Daniel Larcy, director of CEFRET, says: "*company shadowing is a very effective method to let the beneficiaries see in which direction they can go. It is also a way to overcome the fear of entering a new enterprise for the first time*".

IT WORKS!

The article "Reconversion Units: a positive progress report" which appeared in Forem's newspaper^[1], states that the Reconversion Units are more and more effective and successful. Indeed, 60% of beneficiaries find a job within one year and 70 to 75% within two years. In Artlaine, the reinsertion rate is also high: of 260 beneficiaries, 143 persons (55%) have already found a new job.

How can one explain the increasing success of the Reconversion Units?

As Marlyne explains: "*The Units are first of all places of conviviality and solidarity. It is not compulsory for workers to come to the activities of a Unit but somehow the frequency with which they visit is very high. The workers know that here they can find understanding and support and also they can meet their former colleagues and maintain their social life. What is more, the workers can permanently rely on career advisors of Le Forem to develop their professional development plans*".

In addition, the role of the social counsellors contributes to explain the success of the Units. The counsellors are former trade union officials operating within the companies at the time collective redundancies were announced and so they know all the laid-off workers very well. Thanks to this bond of trust already established, the counsellors act as a "bridge" between the beneficiaries and the Units' team. Their task is to welcome the beneficiaries to the Unit, explain how it works and what the activities are: they have a daily contact with each of them. The social counsellors are also the crucial link between the workers and the career advisor of Le Forem.

Another success factor is the "Reconversion contract" that the redundant worker can sign with the Unit. It is a document that allows the job-seeker to benefit from reimbursement (for training and travel) and from 1 euro per hour spent in the Unit's activities. More importantly, the contract gives to the beneficiary a status, that of a "laid-off worker" and can be used as proof that the person is actively seeking work. This contract can be signed for a maximum of two years. As Angelique, a young woman working within the administration of the Artlaine Unit, says: "*the reconversion contract is an important tool as it finally gives to the beneficiary a status and, what is even more important, it is a fixed point from which he can start a new life*".

Assessment of competences, psychological support, training, guidance, solidarity: the EQUAL project has integrated new services and transformed the Reconversion Units into effective and helpful means of fostering the mobility and reinsertion of workers affected by redundancy. "*We have set up a service that is comprehensive and all inclusive by integrating new methods of support and assistance for job-seekers in Wallonia*" states Anny Poncin.

CAPITALISATION OF EXPERIENCE: A STRONG ROOT TO BUILD NEW SUCCESSFUL ACTIONS

The *Decrire la convertibilité* project has its roots in the EQUAL first Round project *Decrire*. The new project, composed of the same partners, wishes to pursue the objectives of the former *Decrire* project, building its action on the existing know-how and introducing new methods and

tools. In other words the new project intends to capitalize on the results already reached in the first round of EQUAL and build on this new actions and paths on this solid basis.

The former *Decrire* project has been very active at the political level: in fact, one of its main achievements was the adoption, in January 2004, of a Decree by the Ministry of Wallonia concerning the Reconversion Support Plan. The Decree states that workers affected by collective redundancies have the right to benefit from the coaching and support offered by reconversion units. More importantly, it also sets out the procedures for developing and running reconversion plans, which directly integrate the tools and guidance developed by the EQUAL project. Through this legal instrument, reconversion could be applied strategically and effectively on the ground. The adoption of this Decree was the ultimate symbol of the *Decrire's* success, and instantly widened its impact to the whole Walloon region.

While the former *Decrire* project has pushed for the adoption of a Decree at regional level, *Decrire la Convertibilité* has lately achieved a big step forward at federal level. In fact, in March 2006 the Belgian government has introduced, in the framework of the "pact of solidarity between generations", a law concerning the active management of restructuring establishing the obligation, for workers made redundant at the age of 45 or above, to be enrolled in "employment units". The EQUAL project has rapidly introduced a request to the Belgian Government for "Reconversion Units" to be able to assume the role and functions stated in the law of March 2006. The answer of the federal government came in early December: the "Reconversion Units" active in Wallonia and institutionalised by the regional Decree of January 2004, can from now on assume the support and assistance role for laid-off workers over 45, as stated by the federal law on the active management of restructuring.

This is a big success for *Decrire la Convertibilité* as well as for its coordinator, Anny Poncin: "*This new public recognition is of great importance for us. Our action has been recognised firstly at regional level and afterwards at federal level. Through the EQUAL initiative and the transnational cooperation with France and Italy, we also have a good visibility internationally*".

The action of *Decrire la Convertibilité* is built upon the experience gathered and developed with the first round project but it is also based on the research of new solutions and tools.

For example, the project wishes to introduce a working method based on the anticipation of professional reconversions. What does this mean? As Michael Vandevoorde, responsible for the EQUAL activities within CEFRET, said: "*we have understood that the best way to foster the professional reconversion of workers and minimize the social impact of restructuring and collective redundancies is to anticipate changes. In this perspective, we wish to retrain workers before they loose their job as this has many advantages: the workers can acquire new competences in a climate of serenity and already have the tools necessary to find a new occupation in case of job losses*". In other words, "*Decrire la Convertibilité*" intends to introduce training courses for workers employed in companies that are at risk of closure or that have foreseen restructuring as a last resort to survive.

Capitalisation of existing know-how and the development of innovative solutions adapted to the needs of workers: this is *Decrire la Convertibilité*. It is a project that has developed effective methods for the professional reintegration of workers who have been fired, combining vocational training with human support. As the partners explain, the success of the project lies in a simple approach, an approach that puts the workers at the heart of all activities.

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