

“Why should companies care about the day-to-day mobility of their staff?”

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Flexible city, flexible working: how can they be combined?

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Abstract

A distinction is generally made between two spheres: the sphere of work and the sphere of private life. Today, this distinction has become blurred. With the simultaneous transformation of the corporate and urban world, we are seeing the emergence of a new set of challenges which form what we could call the peri-employment sphere.

These operate on the periphery of the world of work, in areas such as commuting, residential mobility, childcare and the organisation of day-to-day life.

We consider these challenges from three perspectives: the regional dimension of employment markets, the transformation of the social contract between employer and employee, the emergence of a new day-to-day service economy.

1. The new space-times of work and the operation of the job market.

The starting point is the paradox whereby on the one hand we have the unemployed who are unable to find available jobs that interest them or people in work who frequently change jobs. And on the other hand, companies that have big problems recruiting and retaining staff. In sectors like construction, logistics, retail, hotels and catering and human services, it is difficult for employers to find the people they need, to recruit them and to keep them. In these and in other sectors, these “difficult hirings” can account for 60%, 70% or 80% of total recruitment.

Several explanations for this paradox tend to be put forward:

- education problems: people entering the job market don't have the skills that companies need;
- the poor image of certain employment sectors, where working and pay conditions are difficult and employers are unable to attract applicants: the building trades, industrial cleaning, hotels and catering...;

- the third reason, the problems of forward planning for employment: for example in the IT field... companies experience sudden surges in activity and are unable to find the people they need quickly enough in the job market.

The aim of this seminar is to explore an additional hypothesis, which is that the problem of adjusting supply and demand in the job market is also – and perhaps increasingly – explained by problems of day-to-day mobility.

A little while ago, the Observatory of France's National Employment Agency (ANPE) published a very interesting survey entitled "Difficult-to-fill jobs and the recruiting agencies". It was a survey on staffing requirements conducted with 14,000 companies. One third of these companies wanted to hire staff but it was so difficult that a significant proportion of employers gave up the idea of hiring and with it opportunities for growth

Jean- Louis Zanda wanted to understand why it was so difficult, so he analysed the findings closely.

On closer analysis, these unfilled job offers didn't seem to pose any inherent problems.

- the jobs were not calling for specific or unusual skills
- the majority of the offers were for permanent contracts
- the jobs offered standard market pay rates, often with extras: bonuses, 13th month, luncheon vouchers, etc.

It was when he looked at factors that people tend to ignore when considering the job market that he perhaps found an answer:

The fact is:

- half of the unfilled jobs required people to travel to customers or suppliers, i.e. entailed dispersed working patterns;
- a large proportion of the companies in question were in non-central locations, so could only be reached by car;
- and finally, the working hours were markedly unsocial.

In these factors, we see the two dimensions of the mismatch: firstly the problem of distance and the complexity of commuting, and secondly the complexity of working hours.

Now in these two areas, things have changed very markedly since the 1970s.

The first very marked change is the fragmentation of working hours.

- Many more particular forms of short-contract work and workers with multiple employers, on seasonal and part-time contracts;
- many more unsocial working hours: night work, split days, work schedules changing from day to day or week to week;
- working lives more frequently punctuated with career changes and periods of unemployment.

The second change is the change in our living spaces, with three familiar trends:

- first, jobs moving to the big population centres (metropolitisation of employment);
- second, urban sprawl;
- and third, within population centres, concentration into specialised micro-centres. Today's conurbations are immense mosaics with an entanglement of residential micro-territories,

commercial micro-territories and industrial micro-territories – it is the flipside of the social mix, the fragmentation of territory.

A comment on the metropolitisation of employment.

For a long time in France, this was a specific feature of the Ile-de-France region around Paris: the scale of the employment problems in this area was regional, whereas elsewhere it was restricted to conurbations: e.g. Lyon, Lille....

Today, however, regionalisation is no longer restricted to Ile-de-France. In the North, for example, it is perfectly common for employees, particularly those with “small” jobs, to cover the entire Dunkerque/Lille/Valencienne/Douai/Lens region in their day-to-day work patterns. Elsewhere, the equivalent scale is Grenoble/Lyon /Saint-Etienne or Aix/Marseille.Toulon/Nice.

The combination of the two factors of work fragmentation and territorial fragmentation leads to the highly complex space-times of work that we find today, which affect the operation of the job market and company performance.

2. The peri-employment sphere.

The initial concept is simple: the problems of access to work are not simply problems of transportation. When you talk to workers about how they arrange their day-to-day lives, when you look at what companies do to facilitate the day-to-day lives of their employees, you immediately see links between transportation, residential mobility and childcare.

These three dimensions are very closely intertwined – they are the three strings that workers can pull to resolve their problems in organising day-to-day life.

By way of example, I can cite a few very common, well-known situations:

The case of workers who spend a lot of time (2/3 hours), a lot of money and a lot of energy commuting to work, because with the current property market, they are unable to move closer to their workplace. It is easy to see the connection between commuting and residential mobility.

Then there is the case of the executive who also spends a lot of time, a lot of energy and a lot of money commuting to work. Yet this is someone who can afford to move closer to work. But they won't do it. That is because moving is a gamble on the future, with a timeframe of at least two or three years... These days, however, executives can't be sure of being in the same job in the same place in three years. And they can't be sure that their company will be in the same place in three or four years.

It is this uncertainty that keeps people living in the same place, spending a lot of time, money and energy commuting two or three hours a day by car.

Here we see a combination of several factors: once again day-to-day mobility and residential mobility, changing employment patterns, the mobility of companies themselves...

And finally, there is the case of women, who also devote enormous amounts of time, money and energy to commuting, but don't try to move because they live near their parents who are essential for childcare, especially when anything unexpected happens at work.

If they move, they may reduce their travelling time but they increase their childcare costs and above all their stress levels, because they can't be sure of getting to the nursery in time to pick up their children every day. It is this stress that is responsible for a significant level of female staff turnover.

a) Modern day-to-day life is so complicated that it has generated its own distinct sphere.

A distinction is generally made between two spheres: work and private life. Sometimes, the boundary between the two is complex, blurred, there are overlaps. Nevertheless, “work” and “life” are seen as two distinct spheres.

Today, however, this boundary between work and non-work includes dimensions – day-to-day mobility, residential mobility, childcare problems – which are closely connected and are having an entirely unprecedented impact on the lives of both workers and companies.

These dimensions do not fall within the sphere of work, because they lie outside the normal scope of corporate concern.

However, they do not fall within the sphere of private life either, since they are directly generated by transformations in business patterns and the employment market.

In referring to this phenomenon, I propose the expression “peri-employment sphere”, with the prefix “peri” used as in periurban, meaning “around”. Peri-employment refers to the issues that arise in an intermediate zone between work and private life. And this peri-employment sphere has today become so significant that it can no longer be reduced to a matter of boundaries. It constitutes a separate sphere in its own right.

b) If this is the case, it leads to another question: are we seeing a redefinition of the scope of concern of both business and government?

In the 19th century, the company did everything, took care of everything: work of course, but also accommodation, training, the health of its workers... Government had very little involvement. As the 20th century progressed, the Welfare State gradually grew and the company withdrew within its own walls.

Today, the challenges of the peri-employment sphere are such that this boundary is shifting again. We see companies that are reinvesting in the day-to-day lives of their staff through a range of interventions in housing, childcare, everyday organisation, etc. And the fact that companies are going down that road perhaps suggests that state interventions no longer reflect need.

So the second subject for consideration is the emergence of the peri-employment sphere, of new day-to-day living patterns and the redefinition of the roles of the company and of the state.

3. The new workplace life services: fragmentation reducers

When functional organisations are surveyed, the questions that concern us here are still contingent.

We approached several branches and structures such as the National Association of Human Resource Executives: it is almost a non-problem, except in two areas of activity: contract work and the cleaning sector, where the issues are clearly identified.

However, when you approach companies themselves, the landscape is very different.

Many of them are involved in helping their staff with day-to-day organisational tasks:

- in big structures, whether in the public or private sector, support is often provided through formal and well-designed systems, which are outsourced to specialist providers;
- in SMEs, the systems are usually informal, negotiated piecemeal with staff and resolved through in-house solutions.

These systems relate primarily, though not exclusively, to 5 areas.

a) A rise in flexible working patterns, with hours being adapted to individual needs.

These are frequently used measures. They are important because part of the mismatch in the employment market comes from the fact that working hours are out of sync with family life, and this approach seeks to address that problem

b) Innovations in corporate concierge services: these days, providers offer up to 350 services available to employees of certain companies: from traditional services such as dry-cleaning and car maintenance, through to finding an emergency babysitter or a divorce lawyer. 1% of French employees have access to concierge services of this kind.

The point of the corporate concierge service is to provide employees with services that will make their lives easier and reduce their workload.

c) Numerous innovations in access to housing:

- Relocation services, i.e. service providers which do all the work involved in moving an employee to a new work location.
- France's Mobily-pass subsidies which are designed to provide financial support for the relocation of staff.
- And, on an entirely informal level, employers who buy houses and apartments to let at below market rates to employees whom they want to retain.
- And then there are short-let apartments, residences located in certain employment areas where one can rent a studio apartment for a day, two days, a week, a month... the target market for short-let apartments is workers, not tourists.

d) Innovations in transportation:

- Corporate "pickup" systems which survive in certain big companies and are being redeveloped in small and medium-sized firms.
- Significant attempts to develop car sharing.
- All the systems introduced under corporate transportation plans, in particular to achieve a better match between public transport and the needs of workers.
- Finally, new systems for car sharing by companies and employees working within a single industrial area.

e) Finally, innovations in childcare, with

- in-house crèches in a few big companies,
- crèches shared by companies on a single site,
- or else crèches operating in towns, but on a 24/7 basis to meet the needs of nurses or industrial cleaning personnel...

All these services are different, but actually seek to resolve the same problem: the difficulties workers experience in linking up all their living spaces: their workplaces, their home – and sometimes these days – their homes, the places where their children go, the places where they shop, etc.

These different services all address the same need: the need to reduce the fragmentation in the day-to-day lives of workers and to limit its negative impact on company performance. It could be said that they are fragmentation reducers.

One final point to say that these problems of fragmentation in day-to-day life are the same for all working people: executives, temporary staff and unskilled workers all have the same problems. But not all workers have access to these new services.

Executives earn enough and have the capacity for day-to-day and residential mobility. Yet they are the ones who also find support within their companies: a large proportion of the services I have just described – relocation, company crèches, concierge services – exist almost exclusively for executives in big companies.

For workers at the bottom of the ladder, the situation is very different. These are people whose pay levels offer them very little day-to-day or residential mobility. They are the people who work in the least accessible areas – logistics platforms, shopping centres and a whole category of hotels are located in peripheral zones that are hard to access. They are also the people who have the most unsocial working patterns.

So it is these categories of workers who are under the greatest pressure.

Yet for a whole lot of reasons, companies offer them little or no support: no company crèche, no local services, no flexible working hours, etc.

The third and final topic, then, is the emergence of these fragmentation reducers, and how they contribute to employees' working conditions.