EMCC case studies

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This case study is available in electronic format only
The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions has produced 12 case studies around enterprises in four European countries which set out to analyse the extent and practice of corporate social responsibility (CSR). The project aims to reveal in what way European companies are developing models of best practice around the issue of working and employment conditions. In France the enterprises examined were Acome (electric cables), Arcelor (iron and steel), Chèque-Déjeuner (financial services) and Continental-Teves (automotive).

About Chèque-déjeuner

The undertaking considered here is an SME with a workforce of 200, based in the Paris region, and the parent company of a small group of subsidiaries based in Spain, Italy, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and Romania. It has the unusual feature of being a cooperative society, in which virtually all the employees are coopérateurs (cooperating members), it being obligatory to become a coopérateur after the first year’s employment with the undertaking. The employees are therefore shareholders and are regularly informed of the company’s progress, while at the same time they have an interest in its development.

The company is a growing one and manufactures a special type of voucher, the chèque déjeuner or luncheon voucher, for which it is issued with forgery-proof paper by the Imprimerie Nationale. The production process comprises printing the vouchers on this paper, cutting them up and combining them as a voucher booklet, after which they are packaged and shipped. This voucher is the group’s main product, but it also manufactures and distributes chèques domiciles (household vouchers), chèques services (service vouchers) and a range of chèques loisirs (book tokens, record tokens and vouchers for cultural events).

A change programme designed to prepare for the company’s future

The company is facing a major future change: the paper chèque-déjeuner could be replaced by a magnetic card. There are three important facts in this context:

- There is no certainty that the switch to magnetic cards will take place, but it is essential for the company to prepare for it, or face the risk of marginalisation if the replacement occurs and the company is not ready.
- If this change does take place, the detailed arrangements are uncertain. In particular, there is much uncertainty about how long the changeover will take - a few months or several years?
- Finally, if the changeover does occur, 40 existing jobs (20% of the workforce) would be affected by it, while another 20 to 40 new jobs would be created, the new jobs being different from those lost.

The process under consideration here involves three severe constraints. First, it is out of the question for the company to fail to prepare for what would be a major technical change in its field of activity. Secondly, the course, and especially the pace, of events following that change is uncertain. Thirdly, the change in product (from paper voucher to chip-card) would result in a change in the production process imposing severe technical constraints. The machinery that would have to be bought would be a substantial investment and its technical features would be determined by the companies that make it, which are major international groups. Finally, it should be noted that this process of preparation is still taking place.

The decision to embark upon the process designed to prepare the company for the transition to the chip-card was taken by a steering committee. The committee is not very different from the same type of structure in a
conventional undertaking, except for one particularly important point: it is required to report to the general meeting of coopérateurs, which in the present case means virtually the entire staff. That decision was taken simultaneously with another, which the Chairman expressed in these terms: ‘No one will be left stranded in the course of this process.’

**The tools of change: an atypical information process and conventional human resources management tools**

In the wake of that decision, numerous initiatives have been put in place, among which three separate information processes can be identified. The first relates to the project steering committee, which receives regular reports on the progress of work. The second relates to the employees themselves, the information being channelled through a network of correspondents appointed in each of the company’s various departments. The third relates to the works council.

1. The provision of information to the steering committee takes place in the form of regular meetings and follow-up of the various activities undertaken.

2. The correspondents receive information through the holding of regular meetings, each attended by some 20 people (or 10% of the company’s workforce), appointed from the staff of each department. Their role is to provide information to their fellow workers and act as a return conduit for questions and inquiries. The correspondents are copied in on everything presented to the steering committee.

3. After being informed of the project as a whole, the works council is notified and the staff representatives are sent copies of the reports drafted by the steering committee.

All those that were spoken to during the research of the case study stressed the confidence that they have in one another. They also stressed the importance of the quality and permanent nature of the information both for preserving that confidence and for ensuring that the process takes place as it should. However, it must be emphasised that this confidence existed before the present restructuring process was initiated.

At the same time, the question arose of how to ensure that the commitment not to leave anyone stranded was actually put into effect. A set of tools has been made available, which are no different from the conventional tools of Gestion prévisionnel des emplois et des compétences (Forecasting of Jobs and Skills - ‘GPEC’). The use of some of these tools (comparative organigrammes) is in any case commonplace in redundancy procedures, especially those used at the start of the process:

- the preparation of two mutually comparable organigrammes, the first describing the current organisation and the second the future organisation, showing which jobs will be lost, which will be modified and which will be created;
- an analysis of the jobs that will be lost;
- an analysis of the jobs that will be created.

The further stages of the process are more atypical but nevertheless based on familiar human resources management tools:

- identifying employees’ wishes with regard to career development;
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- comparison of skills of those occupying the jobs that will be lost and the skills required for the new jobs;
- adoption of what is called a ‘matching’ process, designed to arrange internal careers for employees whose jobs will be lost.

This last point is important and requires some explanation. The idea of arranging career advancement by providing training for employees occupying jobs that are destined to disappear is nothing new. The difference in the current process lies in the organisation of career paths that may require three or even four redeployments in order to deal with one case. In this process, the person concerned will not necessarily be the main beneficiary of the training activities provided. Thus, if job A is to be lost, the jobholder may be offered a related job B, whereas the occupant of that job will be offered a move to a newly created job. This multilevel movement (popularly known as jeu de taquin, after the popular ‘moving tile’ puzzle) is probably the cornerstone of the ongoing process.

Discussion of the case

Although the tools used are similar or identical to those used by GPEC, there are two methodological differences to be noted:

- The use of time. The early announcement (in late 2001) of a process which will probably take effect early in 2004 allows time to arrange the changeovers.
- The lack of any authoritarian decisions on individuals’ futures, apart from the identification of the jobs to be lost.

The second point is particularly worthy of attention, because it breaks what is usually an indissoluble link between two events: the loss of a job and the ending of the contract of employment.

The question of profit for the company has not been raised by the promoters of the operation (nor did they place their action in the context of corporate social responsibility, although they are trying to adopt a socially responsible attitude). It can, however, be approached from two angles: the necessary training activities will not cost more than the compensation that would be payable in the event of dismissal. But, at a deeper level, it is likely that the company will retain a know-how linked to its former activities.