

Redeployment units: a union alternative to outplacement

Unemployment is often talked of as a "trial" like a serious illness or bereavement. A tribulation you have to cope with alone. But for over 30 years, a joint job search scheme has been running in Wallonia with trade unions and public agencies helping victims of restructuring and business failure to meet the challenge.

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Twenty years working in the same firm makes it a hard to "move on" from the old job. Because they too have gone through the pain, the union support workers in redeployment units are better placed than anyone to help redundant workers.

Image: © Martine Zunini



1. A workers' education scheme. Between 1968 and 1976, the trade union university provided many training courses for members of the Brussels regional branch of the FGTB.

Redeployment units: four key dates

1977: the first redeployment unit is set up at the initiative of the 1100 workers made redundant by Minière et Métallurgique de Rodange (southern Belgium).

2004: regional legislation gives official recognition to redeployment units and makes them a joint responsibility of the regional employment authority (Forem) and the trade unions.

2006: national legislation requires companies that are restructuring with layoffs to set up an employment unit to help redundant workers find a new job. The Walloon redeployment units are recognized as employment units, but are in competition with private service providers, mainly outplacement bureaus.

2009: workers affected by mass redundancies in a company with fewer than 100 workers can attend redeployment units. Workers on fixed term contracts and agency workers laid off can also use their services.

"The worst thing is that I live right opposite the place. We've been crystal glassblowers man and boy in my family - my granddad worked there, my dad too. He practically died with his blowpipe in hand", says Philip, 38, laid off in March after 15 years with the Val Saint-Lambert crystal works. The business has been part of the Belgian industrial landscape since 1826 and the reputation of its skilled glassblowers long spread beyond the narrow confines of Wallonia. At its inter-war peak, the company had over 5000 workers. Now, after yet another restructuring - the third with redundancies in 20 years - fewer than 60 people work in the factory, located in the Liège industrial suburb of Seraing (eastern Belgium).

Philippe is among the last batch of 15 workers let go. "The union official gave us the news in the morning of 29 March; the boss didn't see fit to come and tell us in person. We all thought we'd work the day out, but they

just said, *Get your things, you've no more business here*", recalls the worker. "They just got us to sign something. We couldn't even argue the toss", he laments.

This failure to explain why has left the four former Val Saint-Lambert workers gathered together on a dull July morning in a Liège city centre building feeling bewildered and badly treated. Philippe, Giuseppa, Alessandro and Michel are attending a scheme in one of the 55 redeployment units operating during summer 2011 across the Walloon Region. Behind each of these units lie pretty much the same stories and sufferings - those of workers in a business that is going under, restructuring, or relocating activities following a board decision.

On the programme today is how to write a good CV and persuasive cover letter. "We try to dispel some of the myths about losing a job, give reassurance and build confidence. Fear of the unknown is the most common feeling", says Jean-Luc Perisse who is running this morning's training session. "So we have to give reassurance to redundant workers whose self-esteem has often taken a knock." The Forem (Wallonia's public employment and training agency) job coaching consultant is backed up by two permanent social support workers, both trade unionists who have gone through the pain of redundancy. "We know what business failure and losing your job does to you", say Richard Van de Ghinste and Patrick Mozin, representing the CSC Confederation of Christian Trade Unions and FGTB socialist trade union, respectively.

Unlike private companies that provide job search support services for redundant workers, like the outplacement agencies that have mushroomed in recent years, these "made in Wallonia" redeployment units have been hard-wired into the trade union movement since the very start.

A meeting place

1977. The continuing shock waves from the oil crisis are hitting Europe's ageing steel industry. The Luxembourg company Minière et Métallurgique de Rodange decides to close down its Belgian steelworks in Athus, throwing 1100 steelworkers onto the scrapheap. Despite strong labour action, the unions lose the battle for jobs, but win the creation of a local workers redeployment service. The first redeployment unit comes into being with the idea of keeping the group dynamic in the company's workforce going and leveraging community support for those back on the job market.

"It was the time of the trade union university¹ when intellectuals joined the workers' fight and took to the factory floor", muses a somewhat nostalgic Anny Poncin, a civil servant who for nearly 30 years oversaw the creation of dozens of redeployment units. Athus and the steel industry were followed by Glaverbel and glassworks, then the closure of the Michelin plant in Brussels - where workers back from the holiday shutdown were greeted by locked gates - and in 2001, the headline-grabbing collapse of Belgium's national carrier, Sabena. Belgium is a federal state where employment and training are regional responsibilities. Redundant Sabena workers from Flanders and Brussels were referred to outplacement, while those living in Wallonia were taken in hand by the union-inspired redeployment units.

In 2004, the Walloon Region gave statutory recognition to redeployment units, making them a joint Forem/trade union responsibility. In any restructuring involving job losses or a business failure in Wallonia, the unions can apply to the Forem's regional board of governors for a redeployment unit to be set up, but not in Brussels and Flanders,

Redeployment units fall within a group approach which seeks to extend the natural solidarity among former workmates and declines to see job hunting as an essentially individual process.



Well-used to restructurings, Liège's historic Val Saint Lambert crystal works is still in quest of a future.
Image: © Martine Zunini

A very fragile crystal palace

Val Saint-Lambert crystalware was prized by Russian tsars and decorated Maharajas' palace ceilings. In the post-war boom decades, the company sold to a wider market for prestige goods. Val Saint-Lambert stemware became a must-have item on wedding lists. But the 1990s saw the market collapse.

The declining popularity of marriage, families' more practical priorities, recession, changing tastes and fashions – the list of reasons why people shunned crystal goes on. Other crystal works – Baccarat to name only the most prestigious – were also affected. The business cycle is not the whole story, say some workers. For Michel, 48, the current ownership – Belgian money earned from Bordeaux vineyards – also bears some responsibility. "When the takeover happened in 2008, I really thought that combining the wine and crystal industries was a good idea. But apart from a few old recycled items as gifts for participants in a few prestige events, they haven't developed it", says the former head shipper. "I don't see the business going anywhere now. They've put a marketing man who doesn't know the glass industry in charge of production", he sighs.

Michel could talk forever about his old company. Although no longer with it, the slow decline of the venerable Belgian crystal works – which he calls "the Old Lady" – pains him. "You get very attached to it, especially as I put a lot of myself into it. I was in charge of reorganizing the shipping department, and involved in its computerization", says the former employee bitterly. A succession of new owners and the drafting-in of managers mostly unconnected with the glass industry and its craft roots produced a loss of interest that no-one even tried to hide. "In the last few months, when I'd go to say hello to colleagues on the production side, they'd give me a reverse V-sign. Not 'V for victory', but 'only two hours to go' – they were on the 6-to-2 shift."

where support for redundant workers is therefore found in the private sector.

"A redeployment unit is set up in more than 90% of cases of mass redundancies. Private provision might play a supplementary role, but the Forem and unions still run the show. There are very few cases where redeployment is handled by private providers alone, and that is mostly firms where union representation is weak", says FGTB redeployment unit coordinator Jean-Marie Lansberg.

Unlike outplacement, redeployment units fall within a group approach which seeks to extend the natural solidarity among former workmates and declines to see job hunting as an essentially individual process. Above all, redeployment units have open access five days a week for eight hours a day to let redundant workers check out job vacancies, update their CV using the on-site computers, but also take the opportunity of sharing a coffee and a brief chat with former workmates or workers from other companies in the same situation. These brief get-together times help them achieve

closure over their lost job. "They get depressed, lose their self-esteem. The unemployed get a raw deal from the media and society... It's branded an individual problem; our social support workers reassure them, make them understand that it is a societal problem not a personal failure", stresses Jean-Marie Lansberg's young colleague Renaud Bierlaire.

It's their workmates they miss, not the firm

Losing a job can cause an identity crisis. It's a risk to be reckoned with for middle-aged industrial workers many of whom have only ever worked for the one firm. The redeployment unit's collective aspect makes it easier to help workers recreate identity values and play to their strengths. Sometimes, activities are organized that seem to have little to do with job hunting, like the makeover arranged for women check-out operators made redundant by a well-known French supermarket chain.

"Those who are still there feel lonely and isolated. They're depressed, feeling that they're the last ones..."

2. A travelling crane operator's job is to lift and move often very heavy and bulky loads from one point to another using an overhead crane.

3. Dyes, finishing products and stabilizers are also often added. These include toxic chemicals like chromium, cobalt and nickel.

The social support workers readily admit that they are not psychologists and their skills are mainly administrative and legal. Likewise, their Forem colleagues are neither psychologists nor social workers. But again, the units' collective approach enables serious problems to be identified. Each redeployment unit has a monitoring committee which meets fortnightly to review each worker's progress. "It lets us swap thoughts, identify serious problems like deep depression. If the situation is beyond what we can do, we suggest specific support by outside professionals, psychologists or addiction specialists, for example. We never force, we only suggest. If we see that some members of a unit have a drink problem, we offer to arrange an information session for them with a specialized voluntary group", say the social support workers.

"When do I have to sign on as registered unemployed? How much will I get? How much notice do I get?" Each group session starts by going around the table. Jean-Luc

Perisse's quick-fire replies seem almost too much about procedures and paperwork to an outside eye. But it's what those attending want. Both the Forem advisers and their trade union colleagues find the same thing: the practicalities are very much redundant workers' main concern. The loss of income is a source of endless anxiety for them: How am I going to meet my mortgage payments?, Where will I get the money for the kids' schooling?, and so on.

These are particularly acute concerns in the redeployment units of failed businesses where workers are put straight on the dole, whereas restructuring companies have often negotiated redundancy packages with the unions that buy them at least a few months' financial security. The support of a trade union offers reassurance and guidance for workers negotiating Belgium's particularly complex maze of institutions and bureaucracies. "In virtually every case we have to correct wrongly filled-in paperwork", say the Val Saint-Lambert unit social support workers.

Only once attendees' minds are at rest about making ends meet can redeployment units set calmly about helping them find pathways back into work. 32-year-old Alessandro is quietly confident – he has an interview this afternoon with the boss of a company that makes steel products for the building industry. But he still plans to combine this likely new job with a four-day travelling-crane operator² course fully paid for by the redeployment unit. 51-year-old Giuseppa – 21 years worked at Val-St-Lambert – has no such job interview in sight. Even the suggestion that businesses are reluctant to take on middle-aged women doesn't faze her. Native French-speaker or not, she remains hopeful and is thinking about going in for office systems training. The worst thing for her is no longer seeing her former workmates. "It's a wrench when you stop seeing people you've worked with for years. I go back quite often because my husband is still there. Those who are still there feel lonely and isolated. They're depressed, feeling that they're the last ones...", says Giuseppa.

It's their workmates they miss, not the firm. Crystal manufacture still today relies on age-old techniques that fall well short of current safety standards, especially in Val Saint-Lambert, whose successive bosses, former employees claim, have never shown much interest in improving working conditions. Permanent dust, no fresh air make up systems even though called for by the occupational health service and labour inspectorate, toilet blocks unused because filthy, and the list goes on. Worst of all is the minium (lead oxide) which along with crystalline silica and potash is a basic constituent of crystal.³ A higher percentage of lead oxide produces crystal with greater

brightness, brilliance and clarity. The workers who mix these basic components are heavily exposed to lead, as are most of the production workers, who breathe in toxic lead fumes.

Very many colleagues had little time to enjoy their pension, say redeployment unit members. "Since I stopped, my throat isn't as dry and I can breathe better," says Philip. While there's little likelihood of him putting his former employer completely out of his mind – he lives opposite the factory – the thirty-year-old is looking forward to his new life – he is shortly due to start training as a healthcare assistant. ●

Crisis: "The bosses used it as an excuse for a cull"

While Belgium may not have been among the worst-hit European countries, the crisis still left its mark, going by the redeployment unit figures. Pre-2008, the placement rate was 74%, by 2010, it was down to 66%. And while the Forem was averaging a bare score of requests to set up redeployment units before the crisis, that had risen to 40 by 2009 and 42 in 2010.

These figures confirm the impressions of the staff social support workers running redeployment units for the Liège region. "The crisis has had a visible impact. The number of units has risen sharply, and more business failures are on the cards. But some bosses have also used the crisis as an excuse for a cull...", says the CSC's Richard Van de Ghinste.

With the crisis, some restraints have also gone. "Some participants don't hold back. They want someone to blame, and say what they think of former bosses in no uncertain terms. We've had to have a word with some", says his FGTB colleague Patrice Mozin, regretting that racist remarks have become fairly commonplace.