

Exploration of some of the 7 concepts identified as constituting a “circular” HRM

Business case: AVRIL Group (France)

AVRIL is an agro-industrial group of French origin, created in 1983, at the initiative of farmers and producers wishing to develop productions of plants rich in oil and in proteins. Present today at the international level, it functions as an organisation with subsidiaries, from grains to different elaborated products and in which each activity creates value for the full value chain. AVRIL’s activity is deployed on 84 industrial sites distributed in 22 countries and with 8.000 people working for the group.

Interview: Marie de la Roche, Director General of Human Resources

Date of interview: 26 May 2020

Context:

The vocation of the Avril Group is to promote agricultural production from the oilseed and protein sectors. Each profession creates value for the entire production chain. By systematically reinvesting its results in developing its sectors, the group aims for a constant conciliation of the economic, social and environmental performance. “The logic of the circular economy is present as such in the activities developed by AVRIL; co-products from the group’s activities are recycled into biomass and produce energy for the group’s factories, one of our units generates fertilisers from agricultural waste, another develops animal nutrition from industrial waste, etc.”

Concept 1

What are the provisions and practices to promote the well-being of workers?

“Wellbeing at work is, for me, a highly individual notion, notes Marie de la Roche. In fact, I don’t know whether to talk about individual welfare ‘policies’, would that not be an oxymoron? For me, wellbeing at work is being able to wake up every morning and find meaning in what you do, see nobility in it, and love the work you do - no matter what work you are performing; it is the notion of ‘doing well at work’. Wellbeing at work also means understanding its own added value, doing one’s job as part of a collective group with which I get along well, having adequate resources to do my job correctly and having a manager who gives me the means to do my job well and who gratifies me for this job well done. Thus, that is where the essence of wellbeing at work lies in, and not so much in aspects of flexible working, teleworking or otherwise, even if this latter aspect remains. Does

the value that I give to my effort have any value to me? Am I proud of it? Wellbeing at work lies in the fact of carrying out work in which one finds meaning, in a company which itself has meaning and a raison d'être and which makes it possible to move towards quality work. To move in this direction, the company can value work and workers, support pride in what we do, feed the collective..."

Flexibility is also a dimension of eco-design of the work environment. How has this been challenged by the health crisis?

"The practice of teleworking was already possible in the company. Following the pandemic, we did not want to decide, at the outset, on the formula that would be suitable for the future, but rather to equip managers with a questioning guide to use with their team to say: here's the way in which we have worked during the sanitary crisis, with different decision-making methods, different ways of interacting...What do we get out of it that is positive and what do we want in the future? The process led to a feedback of information that we consolidated to establish overall guidelines. It is important to start from what workers tell us, to start from the field. But I think it is dangerous to want to go overboard with the distance: to see each other, to meet, to work together, that's extremely important. There is a real benefit in seeing each other. It takes discernment. The health crisis has helped us to welcome the notion of flexibility: flexibility of the place/flexibility of the means used for working. We have just signed a teleworking agreement that will be able to the whole group, allowing employees who can, because of the nature of their work, to work from where they wish, at the rate of two days a week, and we have assisted them for equipping themselves at home. During the crisis, we thus insisted that decision-making be as local as possible, having laid down at the centre the general framework, in line with our convictions but not going beyond."

Concept 2

How to envisage a career evolution with a view to development and re-qualification?

The AVRIL group has set up a **cyclical talent management agenda** allowing two major appointments between the manager and the employee, including monthly meeting points. The idea is to separate performance evaluation (and goal setting) from the conversation about development and career.



At AVRIL, we assume that everyone is an actor of their development. “In the '80s, there was a different approach giving the company a much more central role, such as 'We grow our people', explains Marie de la Roche. “Today, the approach is no longer that: everyone develops themselves and decides – or not – to develop. The notion of individual desire is fundamental for the beginning of any evolution. The company's role is to create the conditions so that these individual desires are able to express themselves.”

In order for employees' individual desires to be expressed, the AVRIL group has set up, in 2018, the **Career & Development conversation**. “This is a meeting opportunity, prepared by the employee, whereby they gather feedbacks ahead of the meeting– from their peers, their N-1 if they are a manager, their No+1, etc.

He/she actually brings the content. Beforehand, he/she wonders about what has been the common thread of his/her career, the major skills he/she has developed, their drivers, their aspirations... with the help of a questioning guide that is made available to them. They can thus feed this conversation so that, in the end, we are in the logic of professional development in line with an expressed but well thought desire. This is followed by a series of actions that allow to formalise and validate the information exchanged during the conversation and to implement a plan to execute what has been agreed.”

“In general, a good HR policy is one that assumes that each one has one or more singular talents. The role of the company is to create the conditions for this talent to express itself as much as possible. The objective of the talent management

cycle is to get this talent, outside of any consideration of boxes, of function: What can you do well? What do you want to do? And how are we going to work from this material? This discussion takes place before the talent review which is the moment when we will, at different scales, talk about career opportunities, mentoring, mission or development opportunities that we would like to offer the employee.”

How to reconcile these "individual desires" with the organisation's collective constraints?

“This is the beauty of the HRD's job: to reconcile contrary potentials. We start from the person, being very transparent. We listen to the desire that is expressed, we give feedback on what we feel the person able to do and what should be deployed if, tomorrow, they want to evolve into such a role... It is during the talent review where we talk about the employees that we will decide on the actions: making succession plans, training or mentoring programmes, etc.). That's where we actually do things.”

Concept 3

Support to the reintegration of a worker after a period of leave or illness (short/long term)

“The important thing before talking about return and reintegration is to keep in touch, explains Marie de la Roche. We do not have a formalised policy as such. It is important when there is illness that the company and the manager take the time to continue to feed the person on what is happening in the organisation. This will allow, after having a discussion between the talent manager and the manager, to identify how the comeback will take place and how to arrange a position. This is a highly individual issue and requires finding ad hoc solutions depending on the situation. In HR policy, we guarantee to the employee that he/she has a place with us and we continue to feed them.”

Concept 4

“**Mentoring** is used with employees whom we consider as being key experts identified in the talent review. We are making sure that there is a recovery with a successor, over a period of six months to one year, so that this transfer of skills can take place. We do this with people who are going to leave the company to retire. It is more difficult in the case where one key expert leaves the company for another, which does not exclude setting up solutions on a case-by-case basis. In the succession plan, in addition to potential successors, we systematically have a line to question the immediate back-ups, that is to say someone who could immediately take over the position of the absent person or the person who leaves us. If we don't have a potential back-up, we know we are at risk...”

Concept 5

Should the promotion of diversity be considered from a “circular HRM” perspective?

“Of course; take the example of the place of women in Avril: as part of our succession plans, we systematically ask ourselves the question of women who could take over the position. This is something that we put in place nearly three years ago to force the logic of thinking about women. Similarly, in the analysis of potentials, we will look at the percentage of women: if there are only 25% of women in 'top potential', while the sample is 50%, we see that there is a problem. What is the look on women? Are we developing them enough? Are we exposing them enough? It is important to look at the subject, both statistically and individually. And this can be applied to women, or to another category.”

Concept 7

Does the company also have a role to support the employability of its employees, also with a view of repositioning on the job market, if there are no more internal opportunities?

“I think that the company's contract with its employee today is their employability, it is no longer the job for life” says Marie de la Roche: employability through professional development, by offering a career and training. “The company's promise must be employability and recognition. That said, it is the employee's responsibility to know him or herself, to know on which aspect he/she is good in and what he/she wants to do. The company's responsibility is to listen to them and, through the development and training plan, to work on that employability. In any case, I do not believe in the employability decreed by the company. There is no such thing. The company does not make a choice for the employee.”

The APRIL group proposes three types of training:

- Compulsory trainings: techniques, recycling, security, etc.
- Job trainings: finance, supply chain, maintenance, etc.
- Soft skills trainings: leadership, management, collective intelligence, etc.

Concluding remarks

Marie de la Roche is curious about applying economic principles to human resource management. “The parallel is interesting around the idea of sustainability, in a logic of career and development that can be envisaged in the company or outside the company. The AVRIL Group, for example, contracts with former employees who have chosen to set up their own business. This is another way of working and another relationship to the company that is going to happen more and more.” However, she believes that a limit must be set in the parallel envisaged, in the

sense that “what is interesting in man is his self-determination. It is not an ore or a rapeseed. He has his own determinism; he is unpredictable and you don't do what you want with them. This, by the way, is fortunate. Sometimes we invest very hard in an employee, and then they go away and so much the better for him, it's their choice.”

However, Marie de la Roche further underlines: “The company has an interest in investing in skills, in encouraging its employees to go beyond their limits and daring to redeploy to new professions, in which they can showcase skills learned elsewhere. If this desire is there, what you get back in terms of loyalty, motivation and level of commitment is enormous. We know very well that performance is motivation squared multiplied by the skills. With motivation, you do twice or three times more than with a skill alone. I have the chance to evolve in a company set in the long run, with a long-term vision. This is a real comfort and an advantage in terms of circular management of human resources.”