

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

Business case SPIE (Belgium)

Active in multi-technical services in the fields of energy and communications, the SPIE Group assists its customers in the design, construction, operation and maintenance of energy-efficient and environmentally-friendly facilities. With 16 locations in Belgium and one in Luxembourg, SPIE Belgium employs some 1,850 workers.

Interview: Jean-Pierre Martin, Human Resources Director

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Context:

"SPIE's business is based on the workers who make up the company: the added value is in the heads and hands of the employees", says Jean-Pierre Martin. SPIE Belgium is active in professions where there is a severe shortage of qualifications on the market, and is constantly looking for engineers and technical profiles - electricians, electro-mechanics, pipefitters, welders, site managers, project managers, maintenance technicians, etc. The strengths of the HR management in place include good career management and the attention paid to diversifying recruitment sources with a view to achieving a better gender mix, a harmonious distribution of generations and a plurality of origins. However, the application of circular economy principles in HRM comes up against certain obstacles that are not easy to overcome in the field, even if the will is there.

Concept 1

The design of ‘work practices’ and ‘work spaces’, emphasising maximum positive impact on a worker during his/her employed experience

"Structurally, we work a lot with occupational medicine on everything to do with ergonomics and working posture, without skimping on the means used. Safety is another top priority, with policies aimed at drastically reducing the frequency and severity rate of occupational accidents. We also make enormous efforts to improve the quality of our workers' equipment. Quite a lot of communication is carried out to raise awareness of healthy eating, particularly among workers - whose lunch box is a bit of a dietician's nightmare - and physical activity, more specifically among office workers. Fruit and water are distributed free of charge."

Concept 2

Processes of understanding and responding to the needs of workers to optimise redeployment within the same company

"Every month, there is **internal mobility** - from one entity to another, from one geography to another, from one profession to another -, sometimes voluntary, sometimes provoked, sometimes even by several members of the same team. We have different processes to encourage internal mobility. For example, all our open jobs are advertised on the intranet and anyone who wants to move can find opportunities there. We also have formal moments during the year when the employee can express to his N+1 whether he wants to continue doing what he is doing, expand his area of competence or move, in Belgium, functionally or internationally. We then consolidate all this information, which gives us an overall view of the candidates for mobility. Finally, we have a Talent Review Process that is aimed at employees rather than blue-collar workers. It takes place between management and HR to discuss people's skills assessment, their departure risks, their development potential, their development points, and the action plans that can be put in place accordingly.

The difficulty we face is that all our jobs are penurious and when a team manager has a good guy, he doesn't want to see him leave for the entity next door because he knows that he will then have great difficulty recruiting to replace him. Recruiting in these trades takes about 120 days on average. We advocate in HR that if a worker is 'lost' to one entity because of a desire for mobility, the manager should ensure that the worker is not lost to the company. Because if a person wants to move, they will move. If the manager holds him/her back, he/she will move elsewhere than within SPIE, whereas if he/she lets him/her experience internal mobility, he/she will move within SPIE and we will not lose skills.

What we also formalized, more recently, is **retention**. We found that the majority of our workers leave us in the first 12 to 18 months after hiring, one of the reasons being that, due to severe market shortages, when we recruit, we don't necessarily hire the first choice, but rather the available choice, which is not ideal. From now on, after 100 days, we organise an interview with HR to check whether the integration is going well and/or if there are things to correct or develop. On the other hand, a second wave of departures is often seen among 30-35 year olds with 5-6 years of experience: we have set up a career interview for this entire target population to check that their career inspirations are met and also to identify workers who want to do something else, who have the ambition and ability to do it and who tell us that if we cannot give them a career path, they will look for it elsewhere."

Concept 3

Supporting the reintegration of a worker so he/she, following a period of leave (short/long term) can continue to be employed in his/her original function or in a new role within the same company

"Absenteeism is a challenge for us for older workers who started working at a very young age and are 'worn out' by the trade. We have workers who started at 14 or 16, at a time when there was no ergonomics and comfort at work today, and who have 45 years of career before the age of 60. Long-term absenteeism is much more limited for the rest of the workforce. The Belgian government has set up a legal procedure in this area, which we make sure to follow as far as possible: when possible, we reintegrate workers, but unfortunately this is not always possible. We have, for example, a computer specialist who has been absent for more than three and a half years for burn-out reasons, and for two and a half years he has not touched a computer. Given the evolution of the field, it should be possible to send him for six months of intensive training, which requires a great deal of willpower on his part. For reintegration to work, it requires the goodwill of all parties: that of the occupational physician in relation to the restrictions he may impose, that of the worker and that of the employer. It is a collective journey and it is not obvious that all parties are in line. There have been successful reintegration journeys - for example, that of a worker who could no longer carry heavy loads and who was reclassified as a logistician in the operational entity - but which sometimes result in the person then reorienting his or her career. One of the constraints on a limited workforce is that alternative positions must be available and that medical restrictions are not too great."

Concept 4

The mentorship of a worker who is considering leaving the company (e.g. due to retirement, or the completion of a project) to apply their skill-set in a different role within the company (e.g. proactive use of skill set prior to retirement, or re-orient skill set to a new project)

"Mentoring exists in the company, mostly informally. It would be useful to institutionalise it and develop it structurally. At the moment, we have methods of the journeyman type: one or more young people are accompanied by one or more experienced workers to whom they will pass on their trade."

Concept 5

Categorising the skill set of workers with a view to planning and implementation of worker-centred strategies that optimise the categorised skills sets within a company ecosystem

"The issue is approached in two different ways. The first is the identification of training needs. We know, for example, when new technologies become popular on the market. We then need to train our workers in these technologies. By having a proactive training policy, we maintain the employability of our staff who, from technique to technique, evolve, also knowing that in our trades, there is no revolution, but rather evolution in stages. Digital is of course taking up more and more space, but it's not as if today there's nothing, and tomorrow there's everything. It's progressive, even if the evolutions go quickly. As we are installers, we also have training opportunities with suppliers (Schneider Electric, Siemens, Honeywell, etc.) who have an interest in offering training to promote their technologies.

We do not yet have standardised workforce planning in the sense of knowing that in ten years' time we will need x number of workers with such and such skills, and then taking such and such actions to get them there. On the other hand, last year, we carried out a whole strategic work of identifying our technical skills by trade (welding, electricity, hot, cold, etc.), with these questions: are our strong points the points that are expected by the market? Is there a gap between our strong points and what the market expects? And do we want to specialise in certain areas, yes or no? We were thus able to identify key competencies through market research. The next step will be to see what we want to acquire in terms of skills to meet these needs."

Diversity

SPIE Belgium is looking for profiles in highly penurious professions, so we use a variety of channels to identify quality people, even if they have potential that needs to be translated into skills through training. "We are working with the public employment service in Brussels (Actiris) to get people who are somewhat marginalised back into work, with a training programme and internships with us. We have quite a few contacts with associations that train women in technical professions and open our doors to schools to raise awareness of our professions. There are almost no women in technical schools in Belgium. We now have two or three women electricians and two or three women welders in our teams. We work with associations and schools that train young people from underprivileged backgrounds in IT. We took on a disabled trainee via the Diversicom association to work on digitising processes. Out of 1,850 people, this remains marginal, of course, but it opens up mentalities because it creates a real challenge of integration in teams that are, for example, 100% male."

Concluding remarks

What are the **challenges and obstacles** your company faces in deploying circular economy principles in HRM?

"In low-margin trades, the concern is primarily to ensure that workers are on billable hours. In other words, it means that every hour the worker works is an hour that can be billed to the client. When we train our people by taking them out of billable hours, it always creaks because it eats into the margins. We need to be able to come up with a model that makes it possible to explain in the field that it is better to extract someone from billable time over a period of time than to lose them or lose markets because we no longer have the skills to meet their requirements. The risk then is that we will end up having to outsource higher value-added tasks and take on commodities. This is not good because it is in the value-added tasks that we will find the margin. Being under pressure of the result makes it difficult to convince people of the need to work for the long term. But the stakes are very real because if we don't invest in people, we will eventually lose skills. There is therefore a whole balance to be sought, also taking into account the fact that, in our trades, workers are not naturally willing to work on their personal development, or at least to take the initiative in this respect.

If we succeed in working over the long term, in programming our workforce and skills needs more closely, in looking for atypical profiles to fill skills shortages and investing in their training, then we can get a head start on other companies."