

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

Business Case: Prayon Group (Belgium)

Owned equally by the Société Régionale d'Investissement de Wallonie and the OCP Group, the Prayon Group is one of the world leaders in the field of phosphates. It has its headquarters and main production plant (800 people) located in Engis, near Liège, in Belgium. It also has a production site in Puurs (200 people) in the north of the country, factories in France (150 people) and the United States (100 people), subsidiaries and sales offices around the world. In total, the group employs around 1,500 people.

Interview: Philippe Bertin, Chief Human Resources Officer

Date of interview: 10 June 2020

Context:

After having already fundamentally transformed its activities on several occasions during its nearly 140 years of existence, the Prayon Group is at a new turning point in its history. The world leader in phosphate chemistry has turned the page on detergents to fully invest in the food sector and sustainable development. Prayon is now focusing on three activities: food additives (to offer consumers the best finished products, from both a nutritional and sensory point of view), industrial applications with, in particular, the lithiated iron phosphate project (intended for electric and hybrid vehicles and energy storage applications) and fertiliser products for precision farming.

"Phosphate is one of the key 'ingredients' of the human body. It is one of the body's electrolytes, minerals that carry an electrical charge when dissolved in body fluids such as blood. We're on to something essential, which makes us think about Prayon's future, which is changing more and more, explains Philippe Bertin. Phosphate must rid itself of a bad reputation for its presence in dishwasher detergents and washing powders. We are leaving these applications for other applications that can be part of sustainable development. Phosphate is found everywhere on earth, but 70% of the phosphate rock is located in Morocco. Phosphate is also found in sewage sludge, waste... which generates creativity to be able to recover it and reuse it in other fields. The circular economy is therefore an important concept for us in terms of business strategy, with a working group dedicated to it. It is one of our future axes."

Concept 1

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

"Transformation of the company necessarily goes with staff requalification. If Prayon is now doing phosphate chemistry and in five years' time we have to make composite boats, it's a question of being able to realign the staff with the company's vision and make them competent in relation to this vision so that in five years' time we'll be producing composite boats.

The most striking example is the so-called fourth industrial revolution, the digital revolution. It requires a fundamental transformation of workers' skills and a 'non-circular' practice would consist - and I am deliberately being caricatural - of laying off workers who are no longer adapted to these new skills and hiring more 'digital' workers. At Prayon, on the contrary, we want to anticipate this digital divide with programmes to analyse the knowledge of blue-collar workers, conducted with Digital Wallonie (the Walloon Digital Agency), Forem (the Walloon public employment service), the social partners and the world of training. The reflection started from a gap that was observed in the company between managers/employees and blue-collar workers on digital knowledge by profession. We are now going to have another divide, new because of Covid-19, between those who work in the workplace and those who work at home, which generates new needs in terms of adaptability. The approach involves first of all an analysis of each person's level of knowledge. With Forem, we have constructed a whole basic questionnaire based on a reference framework of 21 basic skills. A second, more complex questionnaire is planned. The aim is to analyse the gap between the expected skills and the level of skills of each worker. We are also working to make people aware of their level of skills, so that they perceive their difficulties and go to Technifutur (a competence centre covering the fields of industry, digital and mobility) to develop their digital skills. At the same time, the company is able to see from the data aggregates the percentage of digital skills department by department, on various aspects (data security, procedural intelligence, etc.)."

Another project is in the process of reflecting on virtual skills in the context of distance working, particularly in terms of distance management. "For example, one of our managers is leading a team with employees in very distant countries such as Peru, Thailand, India or Brazil. She can only meet 5 to 6 people four times a year, the rest of the time via videoconferences. There are virtual skills that we want to analyse and the Covid-19 crisis shows the relevance of making progress in this area as distance working will certainly become more and more important. We cannot simply take the keys of face-to-face management and duplicate them in virtual management. Empathy, for example, cannot be expressed in the same way. This analysis should result in management training and give all our managers tips and tricks for adapting to this situation."

"We are working with the University of Liège (LENTIC) on New Ways of Working in the context of the forthcoming construction of a new head office on the Liège site. In this context, a reflection is being carried out on how to change working practices within the company, not just at head office level but also in all our factories and commercial subsidiaries. How can we adapt our ergonomics at work, for example? We couldn't imagine adapting a new building, but leaving employees and workers in the factory with old tools. The ambition is to put people at the heart of Prayon, after investing for ten years in the industrial sector. In this way, we're thinking about what we want as a living environment, a working environment that promotes quality of life at work. There are hundreds of projects, based on a collection of all the requests from the field for transformations to the working environment - whether it is the workplace itself, the cafeteria, etc. - at all sites. We are now in the process of prioritising the projects, with a budget of several million euros of investment. The requests sometimes concern unexpected fundamentals: in the neighbourhood, there is another factory and a quarry, and we have for example received the request to protect the workers' cars because they are systematically dirty. There have been requests for the cleanliness of the women's toilets... Sometimes you think in your room at management level about fine theories, and the field takes you back to the essentials, to very concrete problems. Hence the importance of listening in terms of wellbeing at work. Two years ago, we launched conferences on corporate values. One of them focused on work-life balance. We had brought together all the staff, came whoever wanted to. The session was filmed and the video was made available to everyone. There were a lot of questions and we noted all the needs expressed. During the Covid period, we proceeded by another method, i.e. the survey on how the staff experience the situation, etc. There are several methods to go and look for information, such as webinars. Our common thread is that we want to achieve a better wellbeing of the employees, through short-, medium- and long-term projects. By listening to them, we will adjust the organisation and gradually transform it."

Concept 2

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

"When it comes to Talent Development, we don't put a brake on training people. We know that professions will change in the future, but we don't know how. Therefore, we never say no to training, based on the principle of 'a well-made head'. The message is: do what you want, but train yourself, develop yourself through any kind of training! As HR Director, of course, I have to make sure that we have the right skills to meet the company's vision. Outside this framework, there are ways of opening up the framework more widely with a view to future employability."

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

"Contact is maintained by human resources with the person who is absent for a long period of time. A listening time is organised at the time of the return, with support from the occupational physician. However, we didn't structure this 100%, as I had done in an HR function at a previous employer with a document for taking over after an absence, where there was a whole programme of analysis of the job (what had changed, the support that the manager had to put in place, a training and follow-up programme for the person). Here, there is work on resumption, but it is more informal and is part of the context of social dialogue."

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)

"We had a project to transfer the skills of those who are going to retire, launched in 2014, which was very - too - ambitious. We have since refocused it on critical functions, because not everything should be transferred to a company. On the other hand, it is important to carry out the transfer of skills that are critical to the functioning of the company. This involves identifying and analysing critical functions and skills. Then transfers can be targeted. In some very specific cases, we extend the contract of the person retiring by six months to ensure this transfer."

Mentoring is also in place at Prayon for the professional and managerial staff (just under 200 people), with 16 managers, all of whom have one mentee per year whom they support in his or her development.

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

"One of Wallonia's problems lies in under-qualification. Many people on the labour market lack qualifications. Rather than making a selection after six months in the job and having to find out that the young recruit is not suitable in the end, we have shifted this selection earlier in the recruitment process, or even in phases before recruitment. Thus, with two temporary employment agencies, a programme of support for jobseekers was set up by analysing their capacity on the basis of basic elements. They are then enrolled in a training programme prior to recruit-

ment. Then they return to the company. This was done on the Lyon site (France) with role-playing on a chemical operator position and training before recruitment. There is also journeyman training for workers, which is very structured. A skills sheet is to be acquired by the young person on the job. The person supervising him or her goes through each of the skills of the experienced worker to the new one."

Concept 7

Supporting the transition of a worker into the external job market where a worker is no longer meeting the requirements of their current contractual obligations

"In the context of the development of digital skills already mentioned, we have concerns for all workers and, in particular, blue-collar workers. The latter most often carry out their professional career within a single region. We must therefore mobilise ourselves, as economic players in the region, to determine what levels of digital skills we want for these employees, and train them to make them capable, if necessary, of moving from one company to another, a little like the TOEFL that exists for languages. In this way, when the person arrives in another company, we know the level they have reached and we can continue their development. We are working on this within the framework of Technifutur (a competence centre covering the fields of industry, digital and mobility) and Prayon is one of the pilot companies in the project."

Concluding remarks:

"Let's keep in mind that we are in a market, the job market, and every market has its constraints. There is an interest in applying the principles of circular economy to human resource management, but perhaps more broadly to the labour market. And yes, it is possible. The company is looking for quality in terms of the qualifications it will draw from the market. Once it has sought this input from the labour market, how is it going to contribute to the employability of these people over time? How can we make sure that we don't have to go back to the labour market to buy new skills because we have 'thrown away' the ones we had or because we haven't done our employability and support work? Having said that, organising this market in terms of a circular economy also has a political dimension. The challenge is not just limited to the company. It's all the work that we are carrying out, among other things, in the Liège area in terms of training, for example, with the social partners. We are helping to transform the market."