

The International Corner

Have French jobs turned bad? An extreme case of work-family interference

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France is seen worldwide as a country where people value good food and, globally speaking, good quality of life. French workers enjoy the 35 hours week, five weeks paid holidays, unemployment insurance and parental leaves.

Yet, a tragic development in the work-life realm has been witnessed in the recent years. A very extreme case of work interfering with life has repeated itself among large companies, both public and private. Workers have been committing suicide not only at home but also at the workplace, often in front of their colleagues and sometimes in meetings. Beginning with PSA Peugeot Citroen and Renault in 2007, this phenomenon has caught enormous media attention this year, with 25 employees of the largest telecom company, France Telecom, committing suicides at the workplace or leaving letters explaining that work strain caused their decision.

In total, 38 France Telecom employees have attempted to commit suicide in 2009. Over the past 2 years, 8 occupational health doctors at France Telecom have resigned because their alerts had not been heard. An emergency plan was set up to freeze current organizational changes at France Telecom. Yet, the attempts continue as we write.

This obviously goes beyond individual distress. Have French jobs gone “bad jobs”? Probably not, since France Telecom, PSA Peugeot Citroen and Renault offer competitive compensation and a high level of security through employability development programs. Thus, as Peter Cappelli (Wharton School of Business, University of Pennsylvania) pointed out, such jobs may be “good jobs” but they are not “career jobs” anymore: they no longer guarantee life-long employment.

Workers who joined the company with an expectation of a somewhat slow but stable and predictable career development are now asked to change positions every 3 years, relocate as needed and ensure their own employability – a major psychological contract breach. Worse, changing career rules is often used as a way to manage change. As many other large French companies, France Telecom is a bureaucratic company trying to develop a culture of market competition and customer focus. Technicians who were trained and socialized to

value expertise and a job well done are now in sales positions where they need to let go of the public service culture and attain individual performance objectives that they might even resent.

Does the current French crisis mean that work is not valued in France? Not one bit: Thomas Philippon (Stern School of Business, New York University), pointed out that work salience is very high in France, even higher than in the US and the UK (World Value Survey). So the French do value work; yet they are among the most dissatisfied at work. Indeed, many of the workers who committed suicide were among the most engaged at work, too involved to be able to protect themselves from under-performance, self-doubt and strain.

Workplace suicides in France reassess the crucial importance of organizational culture, work climate and relationships at work, beyond public provisions and formal work-life policies. Coping with “good jobs” requires boundary management between increasingly demanding jobs and personal life. It also requires career resilience, the collective creativity and agility to develop new skills in career and work-life management that help prevent stress and distress.

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