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Expatriation, relocation and remote work: how do companies organize professional mobility?



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Présentation longue

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In Organizing Professional Mobilities, companies are understood and defined as “mobility regulators” just like states. How and to what extent do these companies organize our mobile lives? What implications can this regulation have for business leaders but also for their employees, suppliers or customers as well as for local or national governments? The term “mobility regulators” takes inspiration especially from John Urry and Tim Cresswell, who regard the state as a mobility regulator, using mobility to discriminate between those that are considered favorable to community interests and therefore deserve to be facilitated and those that are deviant or dysfunctional and therefore must be controlled or even prohibited. Companies produce differentiated mobilities according to scales, temporalities, social groups etc.

Research axes

- Axis 1 deals with mobility outside company walls and more specifically with issues related to multi-spatial work. The aim is to understand how individuals experienced their position as teleworkers and how these situations changed management practices, processes and tools. It is in this context that several teleworking positions were studied: teleworkers at home but also teleworkers in coworking spaces, sedentary teleworkers or mobile teleworkers, for whom managerial dynamics don't have the same effects.
- Axis 2 examines how human and non-human spatial mobilities were discursively (de)valued by the main actors in the long social conflict that followed the decision by food conglomerate Unilever to close the tea packaging and infusion unit of its subsidiary Fralib located in Gémenos, near Marseille. We also explore the influence that these discursive (de)valuations may have had on how the conflict evolved. This dispute pitted a significant portion of Fralib's operational employees, led by two of their CGT-unionized representatives at the work councils, against the management of the Unilever Group, its French branch and its subsidiary Fralib.
- Axis 3, focuses on professional mobility in the context of a community of car designers located in the region of Frankfurt, Germany. The case at hand highlights the existence of a generalized standard of international mobility for this particular category of workers, which they start building on within the profession as early as their studies and first job. Unlike with "traditional" expatriates, travel is not supervised by an organization, but initiated personally. For these individuals, international mobility in the context of work appears ultimately as something to be endured, or incurred as a price to pay in order to work, with some feeling "locked into" their mobility, because they can't find an equivalent job in their country of origin.

The big results

Thanks to the three fields of inquiry, this research program allows us to highlight several common lessons, which we present in the form of tensions.

1. Tension: endured vs desired

The sense that mobility is something to be endured seems linked to the origin of the mobilities and the decisions related to them.

- For some, the choice of workplace, especially in the case of telework, is a real personal choice; for others, it is the employer who originally decides where the teleworking may take place. The company can also initiate frequent and geographically limited mobilities, naturally associated with working in a coworking space.
- In the case of car designers, it is above all the characteristics of the automotive industry and of the profession that lead to a sense that mobility is “imposed.” The destination itself may be dictated by the industrial context.
- Finally, in the case of a decision to close a factory, the struggle lies precisely around this tension between what is endured and what can be chosen.

2. Tension: expected mobility vs experienced mobility

The second tension that emerges in this study focuses more specifically on the discrepancy between individual expectations in terms of spatial mobility and the daily or more exceptional reality of the company. Individual expectations in terms of spatial mobility are based on two main foundations:

- Expected mobility is based on projections made by mobile individuals about their future professional and personal situation.
- These expectations are fueled and reinforced by the managerial rhetoric that is built and disseminated by some companies.

The resulting discrepancies from these tensions are based on two dimensions:

- A lack of anticipation: the actors only seem to fully measure the spatial mobility opportunities offered to them and the effects of these opportunities as they go along, from one experience to the next.
- A lack of control over mobility: although spatial mobility may have been desired in the early stages of their job or career, it seems that once the gap between

expected mobility and experienced mobility appears, individuals are and continue to be relatively powerless in trying to correct it.

3. Tension: private life vs professional life

Spatial mobility is also a source of tension between professional and private life. Work/private life tensions are everywhere in our case studies. They are expressed rather negatively and have an effect on several levels:

- The level of the individuals themselves
- The level of the family unit
- The level of how businesses operate

These tensions can also lead to a form of over-investment that is more specifically found in the axis devoted to teleworking. The absence of a clear spatial-temporal boundary between work and personal life leads individuals to work more.

The porosity, the permeability of borders but also their interconnections are often presented as advantages, thus encouraging the emergence of more decentralized, reactive and flexible organizations. The workplace then becomes a hybrid space, an in-between, both a professional place in which personal life makes intrusions, and conversely a personal living space that welcomes professional imperatives.

More specifically, some teleworkers have chosen to telework in order to take advantage of the beneficial aspects of having a new configuration in terms of professional/private life.

4. Tension: stabilization vs destabilization

This last tension is referred to as an organizational stabilization/destabilization tension because it refers to the apprehension of companies as organized collectives built around standards, procedures and operating rules accepted by all, employees and/or managers, and oriented towards the achievement of common goals, i.e. the organizational goals.

Ensuring and maintaining the functioning of companies as organized collectives is not self-evident and requires constant work in order to stabilize its operation. The apparent stability of companies in space and time is therefore the result of a dynamic balance, a permanent tension between, on the one hand, forces promoting

organizational stabilization and, on the other, forces pushing for organizational destabilization.

Our empirical data indicates that, in the three fields of inquiry, there is a potential for company destabilization associated with the employees' spatial mobility and immobility. This potential for destabilization stems in particular from the employees' sense of belonging to more or less organized collectives other than the company they work for.

[Find the full summary by following this link \(in French only\)](#)

Synthetic overview of mobility tensions

Overall, the results of our research program show that the practices and representations of individual spatial mobilities (and immobilities) place companies in a state of permanent tension that always leaves the door open to the possibility of organizational destabilization or, in other words, to the possibility that the organized collective of the company will gradually unravel. The current context, that sees the decline of sedentary work and traditional shifts in favor of a greater spatial-temporal dispersion of professional practices, is increasing these risks of destabilization, questioning the usual operating procedures of companies and contributing to the emergence of new working collectives.

Social Implications / Managerial Recommendations

In light of our findings, we can outline some managerial recommendations:

- **For companies, supporting mobility and restoring a sense of control:** support mobility more at different geographical scales to give employees a sense of control over their mobility. The research stresses the need for employees to have some form of control over their mobility. For international mobility, for example, it has been found that crossing an international border comes with threshold effects relating to cultural, linguistic, political or economic specificities that increase a person's sense (or fear) of losing control. This control is also expressed by people re-establishing some borders (material, symbolic, geographical, etc.) to avoid their personal and professional lives becoming too

porous. It is therefore a matter of rebuilding borders, by materially but also symbolically organizing the workspace. The goal for the company is to support employees by setting up procedures for listening to employees and supporting their mobilities, as well as organizational adjustments to increase their sense of belonging in a mobility situation. These elements can mitigate the different tensions associated with these situations.

- **For employees, enrolling in peer communities:** developing and maintaining membership in peer communities placed in similar situations of spatial mobility for professional purposes is a way to alleviate the practical, psychological and social difficulties associated with these mobility situations. However, multiple feelings of belonging may result, which can in turn generate strong psychological pressure, especially if the mobility peer groups rely on norms and values that deviate from those promoted by the employer. To help employees take action and change their situation, several options could be useful, such as a service for them to be heard or the possibility of gaining external support, whether this is offered by the company management or not.

Report and summary available for download

[Download the full report \(in French only\)](#)

[Download the summary of the results \(in French only\)](#)

Chapô

Corporate social responsibility, coworking and delocalisation place mobility at the heart of new corporate management practices. This research project examines the new practices surrounding corporate mobility management. Three case studies conducted by three researchers in the field of management science – Denis Chabault, Élodie Loubaresse and Bertrand Sergot – foster our understanding of these practises.

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