The impact of the ecological transition on the identities and skills of individuals at work

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Introduction

In the current context of the Anthropocene, individuals and organisations must change their behaviour to stop taking resources from natural environments, to stop emitting carbon monoxide and methane, and to reduce and recycle all waste. Today, we are still far from the objectives of the 2015 Paris Agreement signed by 195 nations. As the IPCC reports state, if global emissions continue at their current level, warming is expected to have exceeded 2° by 2050 with even more disastrous consequences. We can see how difficult it is to change habits and priorities. Every day, we see the existence of multiple blocking points and resistance to the implementation of new practices, including the ecological transition.

This paper aims to question the role of companies and HRM practices in these changes.

I will first discuss the structural tensions that companies are currently experiencing, then I will present the results of a study on the representations of company managers, and I will conclude with some thoughts on the possible contributions of career counsellors to changing these perceptions and practices in developing interventions for future and current workers.

I - Tensions between companies and employees

There is a great deal of research on individual and organisational change and it has often been shown that the objectives of employees and organisations only partially overlap.

But today we are in a more complex period where the gap between the intentions and objectives of organisations and those of employees is growing. This is a major tension that our companies are experiencing, and which constitutes a major obstacle to the concrete implementation of the ecological transition.

Indeed, organisations have been in crisis since the 1970s (Segrestin and Hatchuel, 2012). While before the 1970s, companies embodied technical inventiveness, professional community, a space for negotiation and the construction of skills, since the 1980s, they have entered an era of financialisation which destroys their initial mission of producing common goods, establishing a place for collective life and the construction of professional identities. Today, shareholder value has become the dominant criterion of performance and the strategic compass of managers.

This is why capital income has been exceptional since the 1980s. But this progression is at the expense of companies’ capacity for innovation and social justice; sociologists Segrestin and Hatchuel suggest that companies are currently experiencing an identity crisis that requires a rethinking of the foundations of what a company should be in a society which is in ecological transition.

While companies are focusing all their attention on shareholder satisfaction, employees are experiencing a crisis in the meaning of work, which is also a crisis in their professional identity (Dubar, 2000). In a 2019 survey by the French Ministry of Labour (DARES), only 14% of...
employees said that they always have the opportunity to do things they enjoy in their work, 17% said that they always have the opportunity to develop professional skills, 20% always have the opportunity to work at their own pace, 20% always have the feeling that they are doing a good job (Survey of working conditions, according to a study by Coutrot and Perez, 2022, involving 14,231 people). This is a minority. In 2021, another survey on the consequences of the pandemic crisis (Beatriz et al., 2021) showed that more employees felt that their work was in conflict with their ethical principles after the crisis than before. In addition, more and more employees today feel that their work is damaging the environment.

More people are considering changing jobs or careers. Thus, 5 million employees quit their jobs every month in the US since the beginning of 2021, a phenomenon referred to as the Big Quit or the Great Resignation. In China, the Tang Ping movement ("lie down on the floor") appeared in the spring of 2021 on Webo (the Chinese twitter) and calls for "lifting the foot". In France, resignations are increasing, especially in the health sector, and recruitment problems are very significant. Among the employees who resign, many turn to ecological jobs.

A growing number of employees are rejecting companies and are turning to self-employment, the social and solidarity economy sector or the craft industry. But what do managers think about this situation? How do they see the future of their company?

II - Research on representations of the future by company managers

In this research project, we wanted to explore the attitude of managers towards major societal changes and in particular the ecological transition. We wanted to know:

- What place this question had in company strategies
- To what extent the question of the meaning of work was taken into account
- Whether new soft skills were expected in the future in order to integrate new forms of relationship to work and new ways of living and of producing in the company

Soft skills are the competencies most often mentioned by companies because they are supposed to allow employees to face the major challenges of tomorrow’s world of work. For this purpose, we referred to the competency frameworks disseminated by international organizations and called “21st century competencies”. As point of comparison, we chose the Fullan and Langworthy (2014) referential which considers 6 families of competencies useful for the future: Education of the person (Education of character) /Citizenship/Communication/Critical thinking /Collaboration/Creativity.

We wanted to know if these various competencies would be mentioned, which would perhaps mean an evolution, a taking into account of certain social values, of the ecological transition by certain companies and thus a degree of openness on the social dimension of the company.

Methodology

Participants

A total of 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers of 18 organizations in industry and culture and sport.

We interviewed management professionals and HR professionals.
Tools

Participants were asked 3 main open questions and then completed a questionnaire presenting a list of soft skills often mentioned in the literature. They were asked to order each one from 1 (important) to 3 (not important).

1/ What major challenges are facing their company
2/ What are the consequences on employees’ careers
3/ What soft skills are needed for the future regarding these changes

Data analysis

Consensus thematic content analysis and lexical metric analysis.

Six researchers were mobilized to define the content analysis grid, categories and sub-categories.

A grid with 3 main themes was developed:
1. The major changes taking place in the company
2. The consequences on HR management
3. The soft skills needed by employees in the future

Results

1/ Major changes in companies

A/ An evolving organization as a consequence of the pandemic

- Acceleration of the implementation of telework (28/30)
- Teamwork has become difficult (19 out of 30)
- Lack of communication between employees (19 out of 30)
- Employees less and less involved in work (15 out of 30)

"The human being has become extremely individualistic »

"It's an awareness of the importance of things and the relativity of things. Work is important but what is around it is just as important; we also concentrate on the essential values of the family".

- Increased constraints on work (13 out of 30) (decrease in raw materials, budgetary restrictions, obstacles in the development of projects).

B/ Changes linked to digitization (28 out of 30)

- Appearance of new professions, new professional gestures, reconfiguration of the market with development of online products.

C/ Changes related to external factors (30 out of 30)

- Economic changes (Olympic games) (28 of 30)
- Ecological transition (mentioned by 17 out of 30) mentioned above all in industry "we want to see how each department of the company takes ownership of the ecological issue"

"It becomes an opportunity for companies to join the ecological transition movement as a factor of economic opportunity".

- Political changes (14 out of 30), in particular the often-mentioned Ukraine conflict.

2/ How HR management adapt to these changes

A/ In developing future training for employees Vocational training as a major issue but which must, above all, be "profitable" and in the interest of the company's needs (25 out of 30), targeting employees "with potential" and middle-managers

- Individualized and personalized training (13 out of 30) and promoting collective work (21 out of 30).

- Training focused on adaptation to the workplace after recruitment (23 out of 30);

- The training topics are Corporate Social Responsibility issues (psychosocial risks, quality of life at work, equality and discrimination, crisis management) (21 out of 30) and corporate culture (15 out of 30).

B/ By developing forward-looking management of jobs and skills

- Labour shortage in the industry (20 out of 30)

- Employee retention as an important concern (20 out of 30)

- Anticipation of skills lost with retirement (13 out of 30)

- The change in employees’ relationship to work (16 out of 30): imbalance of investment in favour of personal life

3/- Soft skills needs for the future

1. Communication (28 out of 30)

2. Teamwork, collaboration (27 out of 30)

3. “Self-management” (27 out of 30):

By the majority: adaptability, commitment, learning, creativity, curiosity, versatility.

By half: Corporate culture, Respect, Optimization of the position, Acceptance of constraints, Safety, Responsibility, Management of emotions, Management of conflicts.

4. Work organization:

- For their workstation: autonomy, organization/planning, knowing how to manage themselves, knowing how to self-assess, mastering basic knowledge, staying focused

- For the work of others: knowing how to delegate, being fair and consistent in the way you evaluate, motivating others, planning activities, identifying individuals with potential, enhancing the ability to dialogue.
On the other hand, nothing on critical thinking, citizenship

4/ Answers to the questionnaire

(importance), rank no. 1 being judged to be the most important for the entire population.

Table

Discussion

- The ecological transition was mentioned by half of the interviewers

- The feeling of a change in the employees' relationship to work but no avenues mentioned on how to solve the problem.

- Secondary mention of the importance of critical thinking skills or citizenship.

- The training courses envisaged are related to Corporate Social Responsibility, showing that managers are aware of the importance of spreading these ratings among the employees.

Quite classic expectations of profitability and performance, of employees who must adapt quickly.

An investment in managerial staff, who appear to be central and who are more highly trained than other technical or manual employees.

What types of practices need to be imagined to change the mindset and representations of managers? How could they integrate ecological transition issues into their practices?

How can they develop an in-depth reflection about production and consumption to enable society to enter a post-industrial and post-growth period?

I would like to mention several ideas:

The younger generations are taking charge of companies and can instil a new green mindset among the management. Career counselling interventions should not only focus on self-construction but also integrate ecological and social construction and consider their ability to change people’ attitudes.

- Young people, as well as managers and executives, must have the opportunity to engage in in-depth reflection on the role of the company in society through workshops. More collective and democratic forms of management where employees have an important place in the decisions will have to be considered by future professionals.

- Young people must have the opportunity to reflect on the fact that a diversity of organizational forms exists and not only organizations focused on shareholder profit. For example, there are activity and employment cooperatives, associations, and self-organized "liberated" companies, NGOs.

- Career counsellors can also intervene in youth training programs. Curricula must all include the ecological transition, systemic, interdisciplinary and global approaches, collective learning and projects in co-construction with teachers and organization stakeholders should be considered, Life Design workshops aiming at the development of reflexivity and critical thinking should be developed.
Every young person should work with a counsellor to develop a collective project for a sustainable activity that will allow him or her to live while limiting carbon emissions. These experiments could involve companies, to create these alternative spaces, sources of new ideas and new representations.

Inform about the possibility for companies to join the 17,000 companies based in 160 countries that have signed up to the United Nations Global Compact, which is a UN initiative and a call to companies worldwide to align their practices and strategies with 10 principles that derive from the UN’s core texts in the areas of human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption. The ambition of the Global Compact is to increase the global impact of business by living up to these 10 principles and achieving the 17 DD goals through responsible business and ecosystems that promote change.

Conclusion

Ivan Illitch insisted that the only solution to the ecological crisis was to establish, through a political agreement, a self-limitation. This would allow us to move towards a society that he defines as post-industrial and convivial. He defines the convivial society as a society that gives humans the possibility of exercising the most autonomous and creative action, with the help of tools over which they have control (as opposed to industrial tools that constrain humans), tools that generate meaning in the relations between humans and the world, tools that translate intentionality.

How can we develop this convivial mindset? I have mentioned several avenues, but one particularly important element must also be considered: career counsellors must themselves do this work of reflection and training on transition issues, which now constitute basic knowledge that must be acquired and must be an integral part of the identity of any 21st century citizen.