

# Training & Employment

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## Firms and government departments revive the notion of occupation

Occupation-based approaches to human resource management are on the increase in firms and government departments. They provide a means of identifying, describing and enhancing the standing of these organisations' activities and jobs. They are also a tool for managing mobility. Private companies and public-sector bodies do not use them in the same way, but in all cases the implementation of occupation-based approaches requires that certain methodological principles be respected.

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Occupation-based approaches to human resource management, which developed alongside national classifications such as the Operational Directory of Occupations and Jobs (*Répertoire opérationnel des métiers et des emplois*, or ROME), are currently in vogue in firms and government departments. The intention behind them is to identify and describe occupations; they are generally embodied in a directory in which the various occupations are listed on forms under a number of headings such as duties, activities, competences, entry requirements and links with other occupations. These approaches are often adopted as part of an organisation's forward planning. In this case, they are used as instruments in the forward-looking management of jobs and skills and are focused on 'sensitive' occupations, that is those that are emerging, developing or in decline.

Over the past twenty years, these approaches have helped to rehabilitate the notion of occupation in firms and government departments. During this period, the notion has in fact been reworked rather than fully restored to its previous state, with all the attributes that were inherited from the craft guilds of the past. The aim is no longer to encourage the emergence and structuring of occupational groups enjoying real autonomy in the exercise of their functions and the monitoring of their members' skills and competences. The objective rather is to apply the term occupation to all jobs contributing to an organisation's activities, including those regarded as least skilled and therefore furthest removed from the ideal of occupation. This being the case, what does this revival mean? In other words, what is the intention behind these occupation-based approaches? And what actual measures do they entail?



## Affirming and recognising occupations

*This article is based on publications, studies and speeches produced in recent years by members of Céreq on the subject of occupation-based approaches in firms and government departments.*

The first purpose of occupation-based approaches is to identify occupations and to gain a better understanding of the activities carried out within a firm or government department. In this sense, they supplement those statistical exercises that involve counting the number of employees in post and describing their socio-demographic characteristics. Thus they are an instrument of affirmation and recognition, for both the organisation and its employees.

For employees, the term 'occupation' is both more meaningful and more gratifying than more recent terms or those that have emerged from the managerial vocabulary of job, basic post etc. Occupation still has a strong positive connotation. It denotes mastery of technical skills and autonomy at work. The use of this notion within an organisation can also make it easier to give recognition to emerging jobs or to employees in the lower reaches of the skills classification. At a time when constant references are being made to the strategic importance of human resources and their commitment to work, the use of the term occupation takes on its full meaning.

For organisations, an occupations-based approach makes their specific characteristics in terms of jobs more visible. It provides a means of converting into 'individual occupations' the more general processes which, in the language of strategy, constitute an organisation's main spheres of activity, through which it mobilises and links together individual and collective competences in order to achieve its specific objectives. Such approaches often have their roots in the notion of 'core business', which emerged in the 1970s and 80s with the rise of strategic analysis. Many firms use this notion to justify a refocusing on what they regard as their strategic activities; this

refocusing gives rise in turn to extensive changes in work organisation and is often used as a pretext for disinvestment. These firms then seek to take this process to its logical conclusion by rethinking and redefining their various jobs. In so doing, they emphasise those jobs that contribute to their specificities and performance, ascribing to them the enriching notion of occupation, while if necessary ignoring the other jobs.

## A tool for managing employee mobility

An occupation-based approach can also be used as a management tool, in the sense that it is intended to provide instruments for decision-making in matters related to human resource management. In practice, it has come to be seen primarily as a tool for managing employee mobility. This question of employee mobility arises in connection with various areas of concern to organisations, including extensive restructurings, constant raising of levels of initial education and training among the working population, large-scale retirement programmes, the predicted ageing of the labour force, the securing of career paths, etc. As potential vectors for the preservation, recognition and transfer of competences, the notion of occupation would seem to be a useful referent for confronting these issues effectively.

By adopting this notion, organisations are able to develop a more cross-cutting approach without losing sight of actual work situations and experiences. As such, it can be regarded as a notion that is broader in its scope than competence, which in some cases is inferred from a specific work situation and is therefore seen as not readily transferable to another situation and in others, conversely, is linked to personality traits (such as an aptitude to take the initiative), in which case it is conceptualised independently of any experience obtained in the workplace.

The individual occupation also constitutes a good level of analysis for identifying bridges between jobs and developing the common language required to plan and develop them. Thus occupation-based management can often help to encourage functional and horizontal mobility, particularly when there is a need to compensate for a slowing down in vertical mobility due to a lack of promotion opportunities. As can be seen in manufacturing firms and in the hotel sector, this form of management sometimes even goes so far as to curb upward mobility. It then leads to the introduction of barriers in terms of qualifications, experience or competences between the various levels of responsibility. For example, front-line management activities tend now to be regarded as separate occupations, and as such are no longer open to the specialists in the core activity of the company or government department in question for whom such positions used to be a first rung on the promotion ladder.

### Anticipating the evolution of occupations: an experiment in the Thales Group

A company within the Thales Group, Thales Air Systems, which specialises in professional electronic equipment for civil and military purposes, signed an active employment management agreement with the trade unions in 2006 in order to encourage mobility, both inside and outside the group. Céreq was commissioned to develop a framework for analysing occupations with a view to organising this mobility. The agreement, which came to an end in 2008, was aimed primarily at those employees who might eventually be affected by job cuts. It sought to help them put together a plan to move jobs, either within the Thales Group or outside it. The agreement provided for the establishment of a committee, known as the 'Joint Committee on the Future of Occupations', whose task it was to predict the future evolution of occupations on the basis of an occupational analysis. Its members included representatives of management and unions and its remit was to assess the extent of future changes in the company's activities, to identify those occupations that were at risk, undergoing change or emerging and to make recommendations on adapting skills. To this end, various job descriptions (e.g. cable fitter, process planning technician etc.) were compiled as a basis for planning employee mobility and thereby safeguarding career trajectories.

Visit the Thales Group at: <http://www.thalesgroup.com>

It is none the less true, for all that, that an occupation-based approach can be a way of making career paths more secure. As is shown by the experience of a division of the Thales Group that was facing restructuring (see box page 2), it provides managers with an authoritative referent they can use in planning and developing new career opportunities for employees while at the same avoiding undesirable breaks or discontinuities with their previous trajectories. Thus the notion of occupation can be an instrument of preventive employment management. From this point of view, it offers employees prospects of mobility in both internal and external labour markets.

### Differences of approach between firms and government departments

The context in which occupation-based approaches are implemented cannot be ignored, as if all such approaches had the same purpose and were all organised in the same way. True, the purposes are always related to identification and management, but in each case they are mobilised and combined in specific ways. In order to underline the importance of context, a distinction can be made between firms and government departments.

Generally speaking, occupation-based approaches in firms are supported by competence management measures. Over and above the mobility objective, these approaches give prominence to a less prescriptive definition of work and the search for practices worthy of those of the 'professionals' of former times, particularly greater autonomy. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that this emphasis does not in any way signify a return to the traditional notion of occupation, with all the specificity and technical stability associated with it. On the contrary, these approaches aim to develop the flexible use of labour. After all, the jobs corresponding to the occupations defined by firms are usually broadly based and characterised by functional flexibility, with a certain degree of overlap with adjacent jobs, particularly in the case of less skilled jobs. Besides the technical dimension, they have aspects that are shared with other jobs, such as customer orientation and adherence to the company's business plan. The content and boundaries of these jobs are also liable to change rapidly in an effort to keep pace with technological and organisational changes.

This quest for flexibility does not seem as pronounced in government departments. Although it becomes evident when directories of occupations are updated, as the Interministerial Directory of State Occupations (*le Répertoire interministériel des métiers de l'État*) has been recently (see box opposite), it tends to play second fiddle to another concern. The fundamental purpose of occupation-based approaches in the public sector is to support the ongoing

### The interministerial occupation-based approach

The interministerial occupation-based approach found concrete expression in 2006 in the Interministerial Directory of State Occupations (*Répertoire interministériel des métiers de l'État*, or RIME) and in its updated version of four years later. Today, this directory contains descriptions of 261 occupations (prefect, teacher, art technician etc.). The RIME is an information and communications tool that links the various ministries' occupation-based approaches at the interministerial level. However, it is also an essential aid for those charged with responding to the challenges of professionalising the public service. Its purpose is to help the state take greater account of competences in the management of careers. For the state as employer, identifying the jobs and competences that enable it to carry out its responsibilities has become a key function of HR managers, whether it is a question of recruiting, professionalising training or facilitating mobility. For state employees, being familiar with the occupations exercised within the state apparatus and knowing what competences are required for entry is essential for planning their futures in the public service and drawing up a career plan. The first version of the RIME was the result of a process involving the various ministries and trade unions. The second version, which was compiled in order to update the first version, is the result of a process in which the only collaboration was between the ministries' human resources departments. The compilation of the RIME and its subsequent updating were initiated and managed by the General Directorate for the Civil Service (*Direction générale de l'administration et de la fonction publique* or DGAFP), with assistance from Céreq.

RIME on the Internet : <http://rime.fonction-publique.gouv.fr>

professionalisation of HRM. As part of this process, increasing importance is being attached to the occupations and competences of state employees in decisions relating to the management of their careers. The intention is to give concrete form to the political project of moving to a 'public service based on occupations'. The occupation-based approach is supposed to be contributing to the modernisation of the traditional status-based approach, with its corps, ranks and job types, and to the development of better links between the management of individual careers and the employment needs of government departments. Within central government, for example, such an approach can be used to justify mergers of corps as well as to reveal specific occupational characteristics that have hitherto been submerged in broadly based corps.

This brings us to a further aspect of the occupation-based approach that is different in the public service: jobs are being restructured, not simply by stretching their contents and boundaries but also by identifying activities that are emerging and becoming specialist areas, such as purchasing or management control, for example. Moreover, in a public sector affected by job cuts and never ending reorganisations, occupations remain one of the few relatively stable points of reference.

### Methodologically risky approaches

Occupation-based approaches are also the product of the methodologies used to develop and update them. However, these methodologies are not without risk.

Firstly, they require a diverse set of actors to interact with each other. They include: management, which plays a major role in preventing such



approaches from running into the sand; project managers, who are responsible for implementation; consultants, who assist the project managers; HR managers, who are the main users of these approaches; operations managers and jobholders, who are the main experts on the occupations under investigation and, if necessary, trade union representatives. It is important to involve these various actors, notably through the establishment of working parties. Such involvement does, after all, guarantee the quality of an occupation-based approach. It is at odds with the utopian principle of a spontaneously consensual view of occupations and their dynamic within an organisation and promotes instead the notion of a necessary compromise that may result in shared, if not acceptable representations.

However, many organisations are tempted to 'forget' to involve certain actors, particularly job holders. Their intention is to complete the description of their occupations as rapidly as possible and to formalise by themselves what they expect of their staff with regard to strategy without entering into negotiations on the matter. This reduces occupation-based approaches to abstract products, developed by and for the sole use of HR managers and deprived of the irreplaceable contribution of those who exercise the occupations and of their knowledge of the activities, debates and dilemmas with which they deal on a daily basis.

The second requirement for a soundly-based approach to occupational analysis is that the concept of occupation should be defined and that the jobs or groups of jobs 'worthy' of inclusion be identified. This is by no means an easy task. The methodological challenge is to achieve agreement among the various actors concerned when they do not necessarily share the same understanding of the term 'occupation'. Management often thinks in terms of a company's core business or of public policies. Employees, for their part, wish to have the specific nature of their work situations recognised. As for middle managers, they tend to think more in terms of departments or individual jobs.

Finally, since one of its objectives is the management of mobility, an occupation-based approach must foster a certain

degree of permeability between the various occupations. Internally, this involves defining occupations in a sufficiently open way, avoiding descriptions that are excessively closed in on themselves. There are several levers that can be activated to this end. Firstly, a concept of competence can be adopted that includes dimensions that are more easily transferable than the technical dimension, such as the organisational dimension. Secondly, a dictionary of competences can be compiled in order to facilitate the establishment of links between different occupations. Thirdly, bridges between occupations can be identified. Externally, the challenge for advocates of occupation-based approaches lies in the need to establish connections with the national and industry-level classifications and to engage in dialogue with their counterparts in other organisations. Since these approaches, once in widespread use, give rise to a diverse range of discourses around work and hence to very diverse views on the conditions governing labour mobility from one occupation to another, the same applies to the possibility of planning external transitions.

Nevertheless, whether the aim is to facilitate internal or external mobility, the difficulty of the whole exercise may well discourage the actors involved and lead to the development of new occupational segmentations that hinder mobility. The occupations that are eventually defined become established as new, compartmentalised spaces with such a high degree of specificity that they command only minimum recognition in the external market. In these cases, an occupation-based approach proves to be counter-productive.

Thus in order to avoid these pitfalls and ensure that occupation-based approaches contribute to an effective and acceptable revival of the notion of occupation, it is essential that a number of methodological principles be respected. These include: the adoption of a shared definition, the establishment of links between each occupation described and the other occupations within the organisation and in the external labour market and the introduction of measures aimed at maximising collaboration between the various actors. ■

## Further reading

- Ces objets sociaux que sont les répertoires des métiers. L'exemple du RIME, J.-P. Cadet, *Bref*, n° 236, 2006.
- « Du métier individuel au métier d'entreprise », M.-C. Combes, F. Lozier, *Economies et Sociétés*, n° 25, 4/2005, p. 803-825.
- Analyser les métiers en entreprise pour gérer les mobilités, S. Mahlaoui, avec la collaboration de J.-P. Cadet et M. Rousseau, *Bref*, n° 249, 2008.
- « Le métier comme référent pour gérer des mobilités », S. Mahlaoui, *Questions d'orientation*, n° 4, 2009, p. 13-19.
- « Mobilisation des compétences et reconnaissance des métiers », S. Monchatre in W. Cavestro, C. Durieux, S. Monchatre (dir.), *Travail et reconnaissance des compétences*, Paris, Economica, 2007, p. 65-79.
- « Métiers et entreprises : une articulation en tension », S. Monchatre in D. Demazière et C. Gadéa (dir.), *Sociologie des groupes professionnels. Acquis récents et nouveaux défis*, Paris, La Découverte, 2009, p. 84-94.

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