Emmanuel Ravalet

"Mobility as to be taken as an integral part of the work activity"

Bio

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"We work on mobility 'in general', sometimes with a focus on commuting - i.e. the daily movements of the population for work purposes - but on many other issues as well (new mobility services, parking, public transport pricing, future evolutions, etc.). On the topic of large-scale mobilities - long-distance commuting or frequent business trips - I have worked more specifically with Stéphanie Vincent-Geslin, a researcher at the Université Lumière Lyon 2, and Vincent Kaufmann, a professor at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, leading to the publication of several scientific articles, several books and even a comic book - *Tranches de vie mobile: enquête sociologique et manifeste sur la grande mobilité liée au travail* (éditions Loco, 2014)."

Commuting from home to work and from work to home is an issue that straddles the line between work and private life. Does this make the employer's intervention in this area "flawed" from the outset?

"This could be seen as a way of looking at it, but it doesn't mean that nothing can be done, of course. However, the subject is also challenging for another reason: companies often tell us that their goal is to provide a service or a good, not to worry about how people come to work. The employer wants people to be at work on time so that they can do what they are paid to do. While the company may be prepared to accompany the *process* for less carbon-intensive mobility, this must not be overly complicated. It is not their main objective - their *core business* - and it will not become so. In other words: the amount of flexibility in terms of the constraints that can be imposed is not so great. The first step is therefore to establish the level of constraints that we are prepared to impose."

Could one lever be to recruit locally? For example by taking into account the distance between home and office in the candidate selection?

"It could be a parameter, but it will be all the more difficult to activate when the job market is tight or profiles are rare to find. It will likely not be the priority criteria or positioned at the first line of selection in recruitment. The recruiter will first look at the person's skills, what they can bring to the organisation, etc. Then there is the question of their availability. After that comes the question of the person's ability to access the office or site. With the very strong experience we have acquired in remote working - admittedly imposed by Covid-19 – local recruitment continues to make sense in itself, but seems even more impracticable. Moreover, there are sectors of activity where workplace flexibility is not only requested by the employer, but is also demanded by the employee. In IT, for example, some workers say that a job in which they could not work remotely is no longer conceivable, no longer makes sense. The way work is organised nowadays means that people can limit their on-site presence to one, two or three days a week. There are therefore fewer reasons - and therefore less room for negotiation - to move in order to live closer to the office. On the other hand, when we look at the rationale behind the choice of location for companies, one criterion is not negligible and generally appears in the top five: the employment pool in which the company is going to position itself. This is a consideration that could be supported, but which is rather upstream from the perspective of HRDs. This chain of proximity between employer and employee begins at this point, but it becomes less central with the development of remote work: the home-work distances of remote workers are, on average, much greater than the home-work distances of people who do not work remotely. The question is: in which direction does the causality evolve. Do people work remotely because they live far away, or do they live far away because they have the ability to work remotely? The weekly balance sheet in terms of distances travelled is worse: remote workers travel more than non-remote workers, especially for non-work reasons. If they do it by train, it is not too bad from a carbon emissions point of view. If they do it by car, we have not improved anything, and potentially worsened the situation."

Contrary to popular belief, remote working is not necessarily good in terms of its impact on mobility. What can be done about this?

"One way forward is to regulate the development of remote working, both from an employer's point of view and from a public policy point of view. If remote working is allowed to develop without specifying the objectives sought from a public policy point of view, there is little chance of achieving them. Once we have made them explicit, we must evaluate to what extent the way remote working is developing today makes it possible to achieve these objectives. We can see that there are rebound effects which are problematic. The company can contribute to this positively by formalizing remote working agreements: until three or four years ago, remote work was largely informal; today, it is becoming more and more formalized due to its widespread adoption in large organisations following the health crisis. This formalization can take the form of discussions between the employer and the employees on the guidelines within which the employer wants to frame remote work. For example, faced with the saturation of public transport and road networks, there is a challenge to develop remote work as a way to regulate these mobility flows. Today, people who work remotely do so mainly on

Wednesdays and Fridays, as well as on Mondays, but less so on Tuesdays or Thursdays. So we end up with the same peak hours on those two days. Instead of conceiving the capacities of our infrastructures on the basis of 10 peak hours - two per day out of the five days - we now only do it on four, but it is still constrained. It's actually even worse than before, and we don't gain much with the use of remote working that way. If, with the remote working agreements, we establish that there are two days of remote work, but one of the two is on Tuesday or Thursday, we shape the discussion in a way that it will have positive effects on mobility in the territory. There is also the possibility to offer flexibility on remote working locations, or the idea of coupling remote work with weekends, by declaring Monday and Friday remote working days, resulting in less mobility over four days."

What levers can the HRD activate to reduce carbon emissions?

"This would be all levers that consist in facilitating either 'moving less', via remote work, or 'moving better', through the employees' choice of transportation - and, ideally, both. Let's start with considering vehicles made available to employees by the employer. This practice varies greatly from country to country - it is very common in Belgium and Luxembourg, much less so in France and even less so in Switzerland. On the other hand, the provision of a parking space is still extremely common in these latter countries. By providing a parking space, which is generally free of charge - and that aspect is not even questioned - a comparative advantage is given to the car user, who knows that he or she will have easier access to the office. However, this parking space costs the company money because it takes up space, space which could be used for a variety of other purposes in the vicinity of a work site. The company is, in a way, paying for employees to use their car. What we need is to simply balance out the advantages across different transportation types: if you commute by bike, you don't take up any parking space. If you take up less space, the company could grant you a certain amount - for example 200 euros - because you save the company money by coming by bike. This is an approach that can be deployed in a relatively simple way and that could be popular because it's a simple upgrade of benefits. You don't give an additional advantage to the person who comes by bike, you just put them on par with the comparative advantage of the person who comes by car.

Another aspect would target reserved parking spaces for managers, which are generally better situated. This hierarchical advantage does not reflect the company's ambition for a mobility that is less carbon-intensive. If there is a car park, the spaces closest to the office entrance should be reserved for carpooling. This perspective could be integrated into the carpooling policy, alongside many other elements relating to the organisation of people, working hours, etc. One could also imagine crediting travel time as working time, but only in the case of soft mobility travel - i.e. any mode of transportation that does not use a combustion engine nor emits greenhouse gases. This has the added advantage to give the person the opportunity to travel outside peak hours.

The next step is to use the stick as well as the carrot: after having negotiated with the public transport company to have a bus stop or train station situated closer to the

company location, and once you have deployed bicycle parking spaces, etc., you would start reducing the number of parking spaces for cars - or, at least, making them electrified. This would ideally be done through constructive discussions with employees beforehand to ensure they can organise themselves differently with regards to their personal constraints and, if so, how and with what individualised support. This type of approach can lead to solutions that are sometimes not exhaustive - sometimes the car has to be kept for one or two days a week - but that can help find the possibilities where they exist. We thus manage to encourage reflexion on people's own representation of transportation solutions, which are sometimes very firmly rooted, but are not necessarily linked to the reality of use once an alternative has been tested - whether it be cycling, public transport or other. Mobility is also about routines and habits. And it is possible to change those."

Is it necessary to translate these incentives into monetary incentives? In Belgium, the attempt to introduce "cash for car" - a measure whereby the employee with a company car exchanges it for a sum of money, known as a mobility allowance with advantageous social and fiscal treatment - was a failure...

"From what we experienced and from the literature, cost is one of the key factors in transportation choice. If there is an economic advantage to using another mode of transport than the one currently used, there will be an attractiveness linked to this change. The problem is that cost is only one of several criteria. The logic of transportation choice also includes speed (if it takes 1.5 hours by public transport, as opposed to 40 minutes by car, money will not have much impact), but also many other criteria such as comfort (i.e. the whole experience of travelling: the train has a comparative advantage if you can do other activities on it - sleep, read, work, etc. - but that advantage is nulled if the train is crowded and you don't have a seat, for example), the image or experience you have of the different modes of transportation, habits, safety, etc. If we only focus on the budget aspect, our measures will have limited effectiveness. We will only affect those for whom the other criteria were already more or less equivalent to the alternative we want to promote. We must therefore consider a mobility policy that integrates all the dimensions (cost, speed, comfort, etc.) so that the alternatives are attractive."

How can we encourage companies, and in particular HRDs, be mobilised and more interested in these mobility issues?

"One of the points to work on is to make the company understand what it can gain by approaching the work experience from home in the morning to home in the evening, and really take mobility as an integral part of the work activity. Once this is the case, it is easier to understand why we need to spend time on this, why we need to put energy and resources into it or take certain measures. It would be beneficial to move away from the administrative constraints associated with the obligation to draw up a plan, and instead to take a positive approach - this is a matter of education. Companies already have an enormous amount of data and, if they are willing, often have the necessary elements on hand to progress in a simple and inexpensive way."

Does an integrated approach to mobility to/from work in an integrated way also mean looking at the worker's accommodation, in particular its location?

"It is not easy for a company to take an interest in the housing of its employees, whereas this was much more common a few decades ago. Such intervention in the private sphere would be extremely sensitive today. However, seeking to intervene in mobility while refraining from intervening in housing choices - which is not necessarily a bad thing - does not make it easier to deal with the problem. It is in fact very difficult to deal with mobility issues without considering the points of origin and destination of the journeys on which we want to intervene. There are constraints that arise when the housing choice is made without integrating the issue of mobility to the workplace. One chooses one's housing, but not necessarily with the idea that it must be close to one's place of work - which, in any case, may change later. Today, the logic of residential choices sometimes integrates proximity to the workplace, but this is not a very important criteria. Over the last few decades, we have seen a shift away from the workplace, a continuous increase in the distance between home and work. This is associated with several private dynamics, which vary from country to country: the proximity of parents, friends, children's schools, etc.; the acceptance of jobs that may be far away but which are good career options; the availability of increasingly efficient transport services that make it possible to travel long distances because they are fast... The time saved by these services is not reinvested in sleep, leisure or work, but, instead, in an additional distance. This means that we are promoting the increase in distance between home and work, with all transportation modes combined - car, train, even plane."

Can scientific research provide HRDs with information on the issues of mobility to/from work?

"There are a lot of studies on the subject. But there are also blind spots in the knowledge. When we worked on large-scale mobility, we realised that we had a very poor view of certain forms of mobility, namely long-term commuting or commuting over very long distances; dual residences linked to work - either with a second residence, or in a hotel, or even in an AirBnB - , dual residences linked to people with two jobs in two different cities; very frequent travel linked to work, etc. These blind spots can be explained by the fact that the tools used to describe mobility are often based on information gathered over a single day. We therefore have a very poor view of the week. Everything linked to these forms of large-scale mobility is still poorly documented. Yet this deserves to be considered from an HR point of view, and even more so when there is a move to a new workplace in terms of the impact on commuting and the necessary support."