Sharing knowledge about the future of work at the Dutch Railways

Do scientists ask the right questions in their research into the future of work? Is their research in line with the needs of industry and government? Or could these islands bring their expertise even closer together? So we can all together get an even better understanding of where our changing world of work will lead us. With this intention, colleagues from companies (such as Nationale Nederlanden, Careyn, Amphia, Bol.com, SCP, Rabobank, Inhealth, asr, Tata steel, Dutch Flower Group, Manpower Group, De Goudse Verzekeringen), (semi-)government bodies (such as the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, UWV) and scientists from the Future of Work hub of Utrecht University met in the Cathedral Tower of the Dutch Railways on Monday 1 July. The NS - partner of the hub - opened this special location (with a Harry Potter-like entrance, often joked by those present, situated between track 5 and 7) very hospitable for an afternoon full of knowledge sharing.

After everyone had enjoyed the view of the largest infrastructural junction in the Netherlands, Prof.dr.ir. Tanja van der Lippe opened the afternoon. An afternoon that this time would be dominated by stories about age (-differences). She was pleased with the cooperation of partner Dutch Railways in this second edition of the Future of Work meeting. A good sequel to the successful kick-off of the knowledge network that took place at ABN Amro last year. What could the participants expect this time? Three inspiring presentations and then parallel sessions (conducted by Prof. Dr. Tanja himself, Prof. Dr. Maarten Goos and Prof. Dr. Eva Knies) in smaller groups to discuss the presented knowledge and cases.

**Does diversity always work better?**

Prof. Dr. Maria Peeters kicked off with a short introduction to the importance of generational management in an ageing society. She then shared her insights on how different generations work together in organisations and how this affects innovative behaviour. She explained how diversity can be a double-edged sword. How it does not work better in all cases when several generations work together. Yes, in the most positive scenarios it leads to more innovation, more creative ideas and better strategies. However, the condition is that there is an age-friendly climate (few prejudices or assumptions about certain age groups) and an approach to strength use behaviour (SUB, in the mindset of the more positive psychology in which you let people use their talents, also linked to the life stage). However, when such a positive climate is lacking and especially negative differences between age groups are experienced, this leads to more misunderstandings, more conflicts and more stress.

**Examples of questions and remarks that this subsequently raised during the table discussions:**

- Need for more information on generational policy, differentiation policy, tailor-made solutions and strategic personnel planning;
- Start working with personas and create conditions based on them for themes such as working independently of location and time and personal feedback;
- The need for more knowledge about the well-being of young people and what they need to function well in their careers;
- What is the role of the manager?
- An innovation manager points out that an important part of his work is to put the brakes on some innovative ideas because there is a tendency to respond to every 'buzz word' without a scientific basis.

**Older employees and technology**

"Every year as you get older, there are other talents you excel in," Dr. Jelle Lössbroek starts his story. "Look at Erica Terpstra and Ronald Koeman, who developed from European champion to secretary of state and national coach respectively. His research also shows that older workers are often more satisfied with their jobs. This is probably also due to the fact that they know better what they want. However, technology does threaten the job satisfaction of 50+ people (except in very innovative environments). "What kind of technology are we talking about?" the audience wants to know. After which Jelle indicates that he deliberately formulated this parameter in a broad way in his research. "But by way of example, one could think of the implementation of new software that affects your job. In general, it appears that more technological change has a negative impact on the job satisfaction of 50+ people. Jelle therefore emphasizes the importance of paying extra attention to 50+ people when implementing new technology. Plus, you need to adapt your technology to this age group. For example, older groups of employees seem to consider privacy more important.

What else should we pay attention to in our personnel policy for 50+ people? It is advisable to have a more activating personnel policy than a phased personnel policy. So more focus on age diverse teams, internal job mobility, 50+ people as coach/mentor, ergonomic measures, flexible working hours, career development, training, working from home and health policy for 50+ people instead of phasing out measures such as reduced working hours, part-time pension, extra leave, exemption from overtime, reduced workload, early retirement, exemption from shift work, sabbaticals or demotion. Issues that are also important to keep in mind when we have discussions with trade unions.

Is it enough to offer the right policy? No, certainly not. We will also have to train managers in anti-age discrimination, and we will have to give more autonomy to the over-50s themselves.

**Examples of questions and remarks that this then raised during the table discussions:**

- UWV: "This is very much in response to existing employees, but how do we get older employees into companies?";
- The labour market is getting tighter, so what do we need to bring in people and keep them interested (instead of just focusing on the existing employees)?
- What is the effect on the younger generations in a company when many older generations are struggling with technological developments?
- How do you make sure that you can keep older people who are vital alive?
- How do we move people who now have a safe job to invest in themselves?
- How can we maintain job satisfaction with the introduction of more automated processes and a decreasing level of craftsmanship?
- How do you deal with differences? How do you take people along with technological progress?
- It is important to communicate the need for technological change to the elderly because they may not always see it;
- Not everyone wants to be permanently employable. How do we deal with this? Should we perhaps use ambassadors instead of imposing it from above?
- What is the role of the government and ministries?

**Future of work within the Dutch Railways**

After these two scientific presentations, Maarten Willems, project manager of strategy projects at the Dutch Railways, took the floor for a more illustrative practical story. "November 2017 our COO asked how we saw the future of working at the NS? You should know that this year the NS celebrates its 180th anniversary and that we are fairly traditionally organised. There are clear divisions between departments and functions, while new developments are creating more and more overlap. Changes are having an increasing impact on various parts of the company and can therefore be a yellow or red signal. This project was a wonderful invitation to create our own travel planner for the future." The auditorium is now looking at a fully drawn PowerPoint. "Drawings that my wife made to illustrate what's in my head", Maarten explains. Because that was quite a lot. After taking a course in speed reading, he devoured book after book and then started giving workshops about the changing future of work himself.

For his own career it resulted in a job without a manager, being part of a self-organizing team and being allowed to develop outside the box on what he likes and where he wants to go. But what vision of the future did he envisage for the remaining 22,000 NS employees?

The journey started with an analysis of the starting point and the trends. For example, 30% more passengers are expected to arrive in the next 15 years, so more trains will be needed and more emphasis will be placed on providing care from door to door. This change in service demands that we offer a different service to our passengers. Under the influence of technological changes, service will take on other forms. The way of working will go from task-oriented to target-oriented; more self-learning will be needed instead of taking advantage of that knowledge of the labour market. Finally, the costs will be reduced.
Subsequently, various 'theme tables' (in which the Works Council, employees, trade unions and 'young NS' were represented) looked at the wishes of customers and employees in order to arrive at a vision of the future of the organisation. A dot on the horizon to work towards. "Does such a dot make any sense at all? How do you keep adapting to the changing reality? How do you stay dynamic enough?" asks a critical observer. To which Maarten ad rem answers that you definitely need a dot. A point to which you can constantly compare your assumptions are still correct, that serves as a frame of reference or compass. Preferably, you look ahead for about five or six years and dare to look beyond the boundaries of your own company, "as we all do at this meeting, for example."

How does he envisage the future of work? Maarten touches on a number of points; in the future we will identify more with skills and talents than with jobs, we will (have to) take more control of our own career and we will experiment more with our work by colouring more outside the lines. "Can you give an example of a function that has changed completely within the NS?" asks a curious spectator. "For example, the functions responsible for passenger information, which have evolved considerably as a result of technological changes. And yes, there is a group of employees who are enthusiastically involved in these changes, a group of employees whom you have to work with and a group of people who quickly decide to take control of their own careers and leave. All in all, it's important to take your staff with you in early stages of change so that they can respond to it."

Examples of questions and remarks that this then raised during the table discussions:

- Integrating innovations and innovations into existing traditional structures is a challenge, replacing traditional functions with roles is easier in a small company than in larger companies, and there is a need for more research cases on more flexible working;
- Factors that may prevent the implementation of more flexible work situations: interests represented by trade unions and certain quality and safety regulations that can be controlled in a bureaucratic system;
- Linear careers are no longer what really happens. The question is how organisations can respond to this. Is job crafting an option?
- There is a lot of change and more is coming, but we don't really know more than that................need for more information;
- The only thing we do know is that the change requires agility and knowledge;
- And that there seems to be a blurring of the boundaries of functions;
- Discussion is mainly about employee and employer, but also about more and more flexible people in the labour market. Where is the responsibility for these people?

Conclusion

"Today, we have mainly talked about digitalisation and age, but globalisation and changing laws and regulations are also important issues that our hub deals with" concludes Maarten Goos the afternoon. He also emphasizes that in the broader debate three things keep coming back: skills, decent work and inclusion. He briefly looks back at the progress the hub has made over the past twelve months. But everyone feels that there is still a lot of work to be done. Just like meetings like this one may raise more questions than they answer. It's up to the scientists to find those answers. Preferably in a tight timeframe, as the business community has indicated that it values fast research results over long-term research projects. And preferably 'real-time' research, with a practical translation, design thinking. In short, enough food for thought and for further research.
Want to know more about the Future of Work hub?
If you would like to be involved in the Future of Work hub, please contact Thomas Marthens (t.a.m.martens@uu.nl).