

Never work alone

Together we work on constructive social dialogue

Wage policy

There is need for informed choices and more transparency

Becoming a freelancer

A great opportunity or a cold shower?

Meaningful jobs

The meaning of a meaningful job

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Erratum

In the previous edition of Never Work Alone, ACV Puls was mentioned in a number of places, where that should have been ACV Kader. ACV Kader explicitly addresses all professionals and managerial staff within ACV Puls and ACV BIE. With our apologies.

Never work alone

General coordination

Sandra Vercammen
Sudermanstraat 5,
2000 Antwerpen
tel 03 220 87 37

Project coordination

Lieveke Norga
Sudermanstraat 5,
2000 Antwerpen
tel 03 220 87 92

Executive committee

Monique Vanwalleghem
Dirk De Cuyper
Veerle Vanpoucke
Jelle Vercoutere
Tom Bervoets

**We welcome your
questions and remarks:**
kader@acv-csc.be



Colofon

ACV Kader is the network for professional and managerial staff within ACV. The framework has grown from the LBC-NVK, recently ACV Puls, but since 2018 also addresses managerial staff and knowledge workers who are affiliated at ACV BIE. This publication appears four times a year and is sent to all members.

Editing: Sandra Vercammen, Lieveke Norga and Jan Deceunynck

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Editorial

About workable work and not living in a bubble

I recently heard a Securex employee talking about workable work on the radio. A survey by the HR service provider had shown that employees who experience a lot of stress do not see themselves working until the age of 67 or longer. Securex is not only a payroll service provider; the company also gives personnel policy advice. As Securex provides the HR instruments companies need to achieve more success, the latter are not only prepared to invest a lot of money in consultancy but also listen carefully when the consultants talk about the importance of workable work as a preliminary condition for a longer career.

In spite of my occasional nagging, I am part of the group of employees who feel comfortable at work. However, I also realise that things may change quickly. I am not in a bubble. All around me I see what work does to people. The speed at which changes are occurring, the introduction of new technologies and methodologies, the impact of KPIs and the accompanying workload, the evenings and weekends (and even days off) spent on work... The current work pressure is enormous. Within the foreseeable future, we will look back on what is happening now and wonder how so many companies could treat their employees in such an inept way.

I concur that leadership plays an important role in workable work. Within their organisations, business leaders bear part of the responsibility to stimulate a climate of well-being and trust. Attention to meaningful work, personal development and engagement require a certain

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style of leadership. As a team coach I also try to promote and apply that. My colleagues and I reap the benefits of this approach together.

Do you want to support workable work at your company? Would you like to do this as an employee representative? Do not hesitate to contact us and share your thoughts with us on the matter.

Sandra Vercammen

Social dialogue

Sandra Vercammen



Social dialogue roundtable: ACV Kader puts their own house in

It is not a bad thing to reflect on your own performance from time to time. This also holds true for us as a trade union. Do we handle social dialogue well, for example? Is there still room for improvement? To answer these questions, we bring together a professor, a negotiator and approximately 25 employee representatives for ACV Kader's "Social Dialogue Roundtable" on 16 October in De Serre in Antwerp.

The assignment

We asked the group to determine the criteria of constructive and result-oriented social dialogue. The emphasis had to be on what we control ourselves (and not on what goes wrong on the other side of the table) so as to give employers room for input and to create an inspiring setting. This roundtable has resulted in a framework of ideas on social dialogue. We will gladly share them with you!

The insights

- Debate and dialogue start from a different mindset: a "we versus they" attitude (employers versus employees and vice versa) in the case of debate, and the premise that nobody holds the truth in the case of dialogue. The latter perspective can cause a new wind to blow through the social landscape.
- Some topics, such as quality of work, careers and work environment, lend themselves more to dialogue than to debate. We have to provide room for this. Employees who are attracted to these topics also help determine the nature of the conversation.



order

- Participation is a way to deal with the trend towards individualisation and to transcend the tension between the individual and the collective. It furthermore makes employee representatives more aware of the importance of increasing investments in relationships with people on the shop floor again.
- Job contents change at a record pace and new work forms make their appearance, which gives rise to high levels of uncertainty. Burnout sometimes becomes the “new strike” in that context. Not as a conscious form of protest, but as a symptom of a problem that transcends the individual but does not give the impression of being a collective issue.
- Executives are also ‘ordinary’ employees. They are familiar with the concerns of their colleagues and the demands of a rapidly changing working environment. Their specific position enables them to deepen the dialogue and make it more understandable for both sides.

Actions

- Invest in good preparations. Convince the employer of the added value of such preparations so that they can facilitate this.
- Explain your motives.
- Listen to others, including groups that are less close to you, and bring them together. Point out the importance of this to the employer.
- Gain respect by communicating about objectives in a transparent manner.
- Object to framing.
- Share positive results and accomplishments.

Tips...

... for employers

- Listen and try to understand each other (what are the objectives of both parties, what are the expectations etc.).
- Be honest and transparent.
- Take the other person seriously.
- Avoid emotions but show empathy.
- Observe agreements so as to build trust.
- Approach employee representatives as highly motivated employees who want the best for the company and their colleagues.
- Reduce personal and social tensions.
- Consult before making decisions.

... for employee representatives

- Pay attention to the preparation and make creative proposals.
- Adopt a patient attitude and be prepared to listen.
- Remain constructive and radiate positivity and a belief in dialogue.
- Dare to make concessions.
- Keep in mind the human aspect and refrain from ad hominem attacks.
- Substantiate your questions and decisions.
- Foster the relationship with your fellow employees.
- Speak as a group together with other trade unions and employees.
- Adopt an empathic attitude but avoid intense emotions.

Wage policy

Jan Deceunynck



There is need for informed choices and more transparency

Wage policy is a hot topic. A fair wage policy benefits all, but transparency, objectivity and verifiability are not all that obvious. We spoke with Sabine Ruys, trade union secretary and negotiator in the banking and insurance sector, on bonuses, fringe benefits and the pros and cons of performance-related pay increases. André Leurs, who works at the ACV BIE Research Department, was invited to write an article on the variable pay of executives.

SABINE RUYS

Focus on wage scales

Performance-based remuneration

Automatic wage increase or performance-based remuneration? Sabine doesn't really have to think about this. 'We have noticed that senior and commercial functions often gain a lot from performance-based remuneration whereas the opposite is generally true for supporting services and lower white-collar workers,' she points out. 'As a trade union, our main focus is on wage scales and automatic wage increases. Not only because they are transparent and objective for the employees, but also because they benefit the employers as well in our view. They have a stronger motivating effect than an uncertain bonus - especially if you miss out on them.'

And that risk is always there, in particular because companies usually work with fixed budgets. 'This means that bonuses have to come from somewhere else,' says Sabine. 'A trade union representative of a small bank in Antwerp looked into his situation: the employer's new proposal with performance-related remuneration instead of automatic wage scale increases would cost him no less than € 52,000 over the course of his remaining career in case of 'good' performance. Fortunately we can make a lot of adjustments by participating in meetings and discussions.'

Bonuses

Numerous employers award individual bonuses on a regular basis. The trade union argues for objective award criteria for such bonuses. 'Bonuses for hard workers sounds very nice,' says Sabine, 'but how do you determine who is entitled to such a bonus, and the exact amount of that bonus? It is not always easy to come up with objective criteria.'

“Bonuses for hard workers sounds very nice. But how do you determine who is entitled to such a bonus, and the exact amount of that bonus?”



Net wage benefits

What if the employers want to convert part of the wage into net benefits? 'Staff members are often easily persuaded,' she states, 'but net benefits such as a company car, a leasing bike, additional leave days or a smartphone are not always unambiguously positive. First and foremost, these benefits are deducted from your Christmas bonus. It is often unclear what happens in case of illness or pregnancy. This budget is furthermore not taken into account in case of dismissal or for pension calculation purposes.'

'It obviously remains up to the employees to decide,' concludes Sabine, 'but we have noticed that they make a better informed choice if we have shed some light on the broader background.'



ANDRÉ LEURS

Executives and variable pay

Executives often get a variable pay. Whereas variable pay elements used to be paid on top of a person's normal pay, they are increasingly becoming a fixed part of the remuneration package. Within a set budget, executives must choose from a menu of benefits (usually on an annual basis). This results in wage flexibility and wage insecurity. Moreover, it is impossible to negotiate the budget that they are allowed to spend as a variable wage component. I'd like to illustrate the pain points of this practice with a representative example: a large, publicly traded company with a branch in Brussels.

Base salary according to the Hay classification

All executives in the company obviously have a base salary. As there are no collective wage scales for executives, the employer determines a base salary

that is in line with the market by means of the Hay classification. This market position is rather relative as the employer positions the executive on the median within the corresponding Hay level. There are several levels, with an average span of € 5,000 per level, and the employer decides unilaterally where to position an executive. He awards this base pay for thirteen months, including double holiday pay (multiplied by 13.92, the standard factor for most white-collar workers). This means that, strictly speaking, only the bare annual wage, including the Christmas bonus and double holiday pay, is treated as an acquired right and can be claimed as such. Indexation of this 'base salary' takes place once a year on the basis of the smoothed health index figures. On average, barely three-quarters of the wage is guaranteed in this way. The rest concerns a variable pay package, which includes both monetary and non-monetary benefits.

The variable wage package

The variable wage package includes an individual and a collective bonus (CLA 90). Although the latter benefit is essentially determined by uncertain



events in the future and should not be regarded as recurring, it constitutes a fixed component of the variable wage package. The bonus plan is awarded on the basis of an act of accession, and the employer awards the legally permitted maximum amount (€ 3,384 for 2019). In addition, there is an individual bonus based on individual targets. This individual, performance-based variable pay is not entirely subject to normal social security deductions. As a matter of fact, executives can choose to receive at least part of the bonus in a fiscally and parafiscally friendly way by means of warrants, stock options or a budget they can spend on the menu of benefits. The individual and collective bonus thus represent approximately 17% of the wage of higher executives.

A menu of non-monetary benefits.

Last but not least, the employer also awards non-monetary benefits. These benefits concern the work-life balance, supplementary pension, insurance policies and benefits in kind. The budget is mainly provided by the employer, but the executives can make contributions as well. They

can spend up to 50% of their bonus budget on these benefits. Non-statutory leave days and leave days not taken can be converted into a budget. Executives who do not use the company car budget in full or do not opt for a company car can add the equivalent of the leasing price to the budget to be spent on the menu of benefits. Each benefit has a specific cost which is deducted from the available budget. The employer opts for cost neutrality, which means that the employer charges the total cost, including social security contributions.

Flexibility versus transparency

The wage of executives in this company is thus becoming increasingly flexible and therefore less and less transparent, objective and verifiable. Apart from the annual indexation, there are no automatic wage increases. Wage increases largely depend on the weighing and valuation of the position and on performance evaluations. The trend towards wage optimisation has furthermore reached an almost absolute level as far as the executives are concerned. All possibilities are used to convert salary into net benefits.

Freelance

Jan Deceunynck



Becoming a freelancer:

A great opportunity or a cold shower?

The lure of freelancing? More freedom, flexibility and autonomy. However, freelancing also often means more unpredictability, more administration and hidden costs. Do the benefits actually outweigh the disadvantages? It's up to you to answer that question. We list the benefits and advantages below so that you can make an informed choice.

The pitfalls of freelancing

As an employee, you don't have to worry much about administration. You get a fixed monthly wage and paid leave, most taxes are already deducted from your wage and you are insured against industrial accidents and professional liability. If you fall ill, you are entitled to a guaranteed income for the first thirty days.

Things are quite different if you are a freelancer. Health problems? Want some time off? You don't get paid. You can also forget about the nice extras you get as an employee, such as a Christmas bonus or luncheon vouchers. You get paid for the work you do, not by the hour or by the day (unless you agree this with your client). No work means no income. So you always have to be on the lookout for work, which can be quite challenging. In addition, you have a lot of administrative work. You have to monitor your financial situation and accounts yourself (unless you entrust someone else with this, which results in additional costs).

“If I were a full-time freelancer, I'd miss the fantastic colleagues and students who I have had the great pleasure to work with during my half-time job at Ghent University. Financial security is also an important element. Defaulters seriously ruin my mood as a half-time freelancer, but fortunately my financial situation is only in part dependent on freelance work.”

*Fieke Van Der Gucht,
freelance copywriter*

Freedom and other benefits

Obviously, freelancing is not all doom and gloom. For starters, you have great working time flexibility. You work when this suits you - it's okay to have a day off on Monday and to work hard on Sunday. That's great, isn't it? Please take into account that you will often perform more working hours in practice (you obviously want to help your clients as well as you can).

Freelance work can bring fast money: you work as much as you can handle yourself. When you work and where you work actually do not really matter anymore. So you can comfortably stay at home during rush hour – unless some clients expect you at set times.

Since you are your own boss, you can easily dismiss annoying clients and/or dull projects.

“As a freelancer, you determine who you want to work for. This results in a great deal of diversity.”

*Bram Vandenbussche,
freelance lighting and sound technician*

Last but not least, you may have to do everything yourself - administration and sales as well as the marketing of your own brand - but this means you remain in full control. You set your rates and negotiate with your clients.

“The main benefit is that you are your own boss. I can do what I want and can say 'no' to things I do not want to do.”

*Jef Boes,
freelance photographer and film maker*

United Freelancers helps you on your way

Being a freelancer does not mean being alone or doing everything by yourself. United Freelancers unites freelancers and provides individual support, legal assistance and professional advice (for instance to limit certain risks for self-employed people). You can also engage in collective negotiations, as sometimes you achieve better results together than alone. Are you thinking about self-employment? Or do you want to be self-employed in a secondary profession? Do not hesitate to contact us. ACV members can rely on their support free of charge.

MORE INFORMATION ON
www.unitedfreelancers.be

Meaningful jobs

Lieveke Norga



The meaning of a meaningful job

Imagine that every one of us, irrespective of our personal situation or occupation, receives an income which enables us to maintain a modest standard of living.

Would you continue to do your job? And if so, for what reasons? Because it gives you satisfaction, or because of the contact with co-workers? Because it allows you to make a meaningful contribution to society? Would you still spend as much time on your job? Would you stop performing certain tasks? This utopian reflection confronts us with the place our job occupies in our lives.

David Graeber and his *Bullshit Jobs*

Our way of looking at (paid) work has been reflected upon by philosophers for centuries. David Graeber's book *Bullshit Jobs* is a 21st-century analysis of the value of work in our present-day society.

In HR circles, the conviction is that employees attach ever greater importance to meaningful jobs. However, Graeber concludes that, due to a complex combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, a considerable (and growing) part of employees continues to perform jobs which they experience as completely meaningless, which is of course detrimental to their job satisfaction.

Among these employees are highly qualified knowledge workers who fail to implement structural solutions to problems due to corporate policy or for personal reasons. Another group consists of specialised technicians who need to be available for emergencies, but rarely have anything useful to do the rest of time. And then there are employees who are principally engaged in registering and reporting, but do not have the feeling that their work has any practical application.

Not very meaningful? Have the courage to admit it ...

Paid work is a fetish in our economy. Those who do not work are "lazy" or "incompetent". That is why



employees often find it difficult to admit (to themselves, their employer and/or the outside world) that their job is not very meaningful or challenging. In addition, Graeber remarks that people who end up in such a situation often earn more than those who carry out indispensable tasks, such as garbage collectors, cleaners and night nurses. It seems as if the meaningfulness of those jobs is part of the remuneration package.

Those with a so-called bullshit job are often aware of how burdensome this working situation is. The mantra of efficiency, productivity and success which dominates our economy weighs on those who fear they do not meet these criteria. Moreover, it appears to be difficult to break the deadlock or to create a liveable situation, e.g. by allowing yourself more inspiring activities when you have little to do at work. This inevitably feels like a transgression.

... and change course

Are frustration, boredom or dissatisfaction regularly part of your job reality? Your career coach can help you change course. He or she will ask the right questions so that you gain greater insight into your capacities and in the conditions for a healthy dose of job satisfaction. This enables you to make smart decisions with a view to a (more) meaningful career.

Bullshit Jobs (2018) by David Graeber is an eye-opening analysis of the reality that numerous employees experience the work they perform as pointless and meaningless. It is highly recommended for those who are not afraid of controversial ideas.

Are we about to fall into the other extreme? Employers are increasingly complaining about the unrealistic expectations of applicants in terms of the meaningfulness of their future job. It is probably not a healthy ambition to remain convinced of the value created by all aspects of your work in every stage of your career and every day of your working life. Perhaps it is sometimes nice to keep in mind that your job is “just” a job. Without a doubt, it constitutes a substantial part of who you are or aspire to be, but your identity is also determined by other aspects of your life.

A photograph of a man and a woman in a professional setting. The man, on the left, is wearing a white shirt and glasses, and is embracing the woman from behind. The woman, on the right, is wearing a blue ribbed sweater and is smiling. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue.

Relations at work

Lieveke Norga

From colleagues to lovers: dos and don'ts

Good contacts between co-workers have a considerable impact on job satisfaction. The results of a poll conducted by recruitment agency Hays in 2018 are not surprising: 65% of participants attach great importance to friendship in the workplace. Only four percent think that friendship in the workplace is not important at all. Some companies try to enhance social relations between employees to help them identify with the company (even though we don't see a lot of clear examples of conscious company policies in this regard in Flanders). However, the situation changes completely if two direct or indirect colleagues fall in love.

Suspicion of relationships in the workplace

Relationships inevitably create an appearance of bias (as does friendship for that matter), have a real or imagined impact on professional focus and are unpredictable in nature: all this is not conducive to ensuring a serene, stable working atmosphere, especially in case those involved are members of the same team or work within the same hierarchical structure. It is therefore not surprising that the employees who work together with the couple and their employer are often wary of the influence of a romantic relationship on their professional cooperation.

Need for a general framework

Employers often respond on an ad hoc basis, depending on whether they see the relationship as problematic or not. Employees often experience this as arbitrary. Suddenly and out of the blue, management comes up with rules, and the relationship even appears to be a stick to beat them with. Someone is transferred, a promotion is denied or in exceptional cases, people are fired because the love relationship would have professionally unacceptable consequences.

Employees want to know where they stand, so they can make informed personal choices: questions range from “Will this be a serious, long-term relationship?” to “Do we discuss this at work or keep it a secret (for the time being)?”. Employees therefore benefit from a transparent agreement framework which, apart from concrete cases, determines how the company should deal with romantic relationships between co-workers. Of course, this framework should take into account the corporate culture, the activities and the requirements connected to the concrete working conditions. The following questions may be useful in establishing such an agreement framework:

- Can partners be members of the same team?
- If there is no direct hierarchical working relationship, can somebody be part of the hierarchy when their partner is an employee?
- And what about partners who do work in the same hierarchical structure?

“Employees benefit from a transparent agreement framework which determines how the company should deal with romantic relationships between co-workers.”

Clarify the situation

If codes of conduct have been drafted unilaterally without any social dialogue or involvement of the employees, they risk serving only to provide legal cover to the employer. For instance, the latter can use such a code to oblige employees to report a relationship between colleagues (the validity of this obligation can be challenged if there is no demonstrable impact on professional effectiveness) or assess difficulties after a breakup as ‘professional errors’.

Employees primarily want clarity as to the impact of a relationship with a co-worker on their current and future career opportunities. Is such clarity lacking in your company? Then encourage your employee representative to put this topic on the agenda. You can also address your ACV contact discretely to hold your individual situation up to the light so that you know where you stand.

¹ Source: <https://haysbelgium.prezly.com/6-op-tien-belgen-vinden-vriendschap-op-het-werk-heel-belangrijk>

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Quarterly ACV-magazine
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