

# NEVER WORK • ALONE

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There's a limit to your energy level

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Increasingly more employees hesitate to speak out

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## Never work alone

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## Colophon

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

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## Voorwoord

# With mildness, reflection and participation, we will take steps forward

*“When I look back on my career, I did not see my children very often. And they missed me because of the many hours that I worked.”* Is this a quote by a male executive, 65, who is about to retire, with a bouquet of flowers in his hand thanking his spouse for supporting him through the years? Oh no, this is a quote by a female friend. Sorry guys, for this typical example of stereotyping.

The friend in question is far from being 60, but she sees herself going down the same road and openly wonders what she is doing. “Are we, female knowledge workers, executives and managers, not just following in the footsteps of our male colleagues? And that in a time when more men and fathers are setting boundaries? And if we don’t want to go down the same road, what then?” I am aware that I run the risk of being accused of making women feel guilty. I apologise in advance, because that is not my intention. But we mustn’t sweep such issues under the rug. We must look for solutions together.

Keeping this sometimes hilarious but also uncomfortable chat in mind, I will assess the new government measure on disconnection. Technology has made working before and after the traditional office hours significantly easier. The result has not been so much a shift as an accumulation of working hours. And now that more women are moving into positions of responsibility – still too

few, admittedly – we too have our share of that. Recovery time is crucial for health and well-being, so companies need to make the right to disconnect more concrete. I am a fan.

The critical reactions, however, aren’t entirely unjustified: it’s a drop in the ocean, the root of the problem is not addressed, one measure is not going to make a difference ... But I am still a fan. Especially of the discussions on the topic. I’m less of a fan of imposed rules without reflection or participation. What exactly does the right to disconnect mean? How do we prevent PCs, smartphones and tablets interrupting our weekends and holidays? How can we make employees and their managers more aware of this? How does social dialogue on working and recovery time fit into our organisation’s culture? Those are the questions I want to discuss with my colleagues.

And a hint for Tom, Bart, Lieze, Diane, Saida and Georges: be kind to yourself when you get the feeling you aren’t there enough for yourself, your partner, your children, your parents ... What’s done, is done. Think about it, look ahead and deal with it. Talk about it with you colleagues. Our employee delegates would like to put the topic on the agenda with you.

**Sandra Vercammen**

# Deconnection

Jan Deceunynck



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PROFESSOR ELFI BAILLIEN PLEAS FOR DISCONNECTION

## **“Constant stress is exhausting, even for the most passionate employee”**

Since the labour deal, the right to disconnect has been a hot topic of conversation. And rightly so, thinks Elfi Baillien, senior lecturer of psychosocial risks and digital well-being at KU Leuven. “People are like batteries and need to recharge from time to time. No matter how passionate you are about your job, your energy level is limited.”

### **How important is disconnection?**

**Baillien:** Very important. The workability monitor of the Social and Economic Council of Flanders indicates that the workload is not going in the right direction. Between 2016 en 2019, the indicators for stress, work-life conflicts, workload, emotional strain and overtime increased. More than half of the employees stated in 2019 that they were suffering from problematic or acutely problematic stress and workload. And that was before the pandemic. Since then, hybrid working has caused additional confusion. How do I address this problem? How do I find a structure that works for me? Disconnection is a very important aspect of that.

### **The question is, of course, how to do that. Technology doesn't make it easy to disconnect from work.**

**Baillien:** Technology has advantages and disadvantages. It gives employees more control. But at the same time, work is always there, everywhere. Boundaries between work and private life are blurring. In the past, if you left the office, you were also away from work. Now, you're often an employee, parent, partner etc. at the same time. Always being on can be very disruptive. Interference between the different roles is much easier, so at peak moments you feel like you're not fulfilling any role properly. No doubt many readers have had the potatoes boil over when they were quickly answering an e-mail. You're also exposed to stressors longer because work never stops. That is exhausting, even for the most passionate employee.

### **How do you find a balance?**

**Baillien:** Disconnection does not mean that you have to turn everything off at once. That doesn't work. It comes down to setting boundaries at work. You can, for example, mute your e-mail or Whatsapp to make sure that you don't receive any messages from work. You can turn off your notifications. You can block your screen time during certain hours. There are digital tools to help you with that. I use a focus tool on my iPhone, which filters away what I don't want to see or hear at certain times. Employers can play an important role in this process, because not everyone is aware of the technological possibilities to disconnect.

### **But what if your employer wants you to be available or gives you so much work that you have no other option but to go through your e-mails at night?**

**Baillien:** Then someone needs to remind them of their responsibility. Employers bear the primary responsibility for workable work. They need to make sure that the work-life balance is okay, that the workload and stress levels are kept under control ... The basic question is always *why* employees continue to work overtime. If it's because of the workload, it is up to the employer to do something about it. But even if an employee 'chooses' to work too much, the employer remains responsible for workable work and limits to working time.

### **That is no easy task. Employees don't want to be taken by the hand.**

**Baillien:** Making strict agreements isn't always easy. The more diverse the group, the more difficult it is. Because everyone has different possibilities and needs. A mother with young kids needs a different balance than a younger or older employee. But you can raise awareness as an employer. You can make agreements on working time that serve as a framework or tell the employee in time that enough is enough.

### **Which role can trade unions play in this context?**

**Baillien:** First of all, they can raise awareness on this topic. They can help employees with disconnecting from work and tell them that it is okay or even necessary to disconnect. Secondly, they can continue to remind the employer of their responsibility. Workable work is *their* responsibility. It is up to the employer to keep the workload and overload under control. Trade unions are important in raising this issue.

# Participation

Lieveke Norga



EMPLOYEE SILENCE

**Increasingly more employees  
hesitate to speak out**

We have already experienced that working from home structurally does not benefit our relationships with our colleagues. Using the participation barometer<sup>1</sup>, professor Peggy De Prins investigated whether Covid also had an impact on the extent to which employees say what's on their mind in the organisation.

She uses the term *employee silence*, the mirror image of the more common concept of *employee voice*. This umbrella term bundles all the ways in which employees can participate and voice their opinion. This can be done both directly, for example by giving everyone the opportunity to speak freely during a meeting, and more indirectly through staff representation in social dialogue. Participation is organised formally (or not), but can also be realised through informal channels: your boss who really listens, for example, when you say to them while you're waiting for the lift that the new work organisation is causing considerable delay.

### Who remains silent?

But even a well-developed culture of employee participation does not rule out that employees choose, consciously or unconsciously, not to voice their opinion. Professor De Prins uses the term *employee silence* to describe this. The study of 1,600 employees (from various job groups and ages) from a broad spectrum of organisations shows that no fewer than 21% of the employees interviewed have remained silent more since Covid than before. What's painful is that 40% even admits that the social climate in the organisation in general has deteriorated: more calculation, more reservation, more uncertainty, less nuance and more alienation.

Who remains silent? 18% of the surveyed employees are persistent in their remaining silent. In this group, we find more part-time colleagues, more executive and lower-skilled profiles, and more employees working in medium-sized organisations. The group of employees who would rather stay quiet is more limited in both really small and really large organisations. On the other hand, almost a third of the group surveyed is part of

the hard core of 'speakers', who like to take every opportunity to share their opinion.

### Why do we remain silent?

Professor De Prins notices a few factors. Firstly, there are quite a few colleagues who just don't want 'to be difficult'. Things are complicated enough already, my opinion on top of that won't bring us any closer to a solution. On the other hand, there is also the more uncertain, reserved silence. Giving negative feedback is often uncomfortable, it requires self-confidence and the competence to express your own ideas in a constructive way if they go against the current. And finally, there is a considerable group who think giving input is pointless in the current organisational reality. Remaining silent then becomes more of a demonstration of resignation or even cynicism.

A typically Belgian characteristic, according to professor De Prins, is the combinations of a relatively large power distance (or the extent to which hierarchy plays a role in social relationships, in this case within the company or institution) and, at the same time, a pronounced degree of individualism. Sometimes this entails a difficult dichotomy, as a result of which shadow behaviour, for example in the form of not expressing out loud what one thinks about the manager in question, is relatively common.

### What do we remain silent about?

Firstly, concerns about workload and work organisation are not voiced and those are the two issues that have only become more acute in recent months, because of everyone working from home.

In any case, the reactions of the employees surveyed make it clear that a deliberate organisational policy is needed to compensate for the impact of working from home. More dialogue, more organised consultation and more explicit efforts to establish a culture of negotiability in which employees don't only see the opportunity, but also want to express their experience. It won't only benefit the connection between the employees, but also bring out the collective wisdom more.

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\* A collaboration between SD Worx, Jobat and AMSTh

# Wage norm

Jan Deceunynck

ACV IS TOUGH ON THE BELGIAN GOVERNMENT

## **Dividends have increased sharply, but there is almost no wage growth**

In the past few years, the wage norm legislation has put a real brake on wage growth in our country. Wages must not increase by more than 0.4%. ACV and other trade unions have opposed this law. A petition has already been signed almost 100,000 times. We questioned Chris Serroyen, head of the ACV research department, about the how and the why of the strong opposition.



**For someone with a decent gross salary and some nice fringe benefits, purchasing power is not their first concern. Moreover, there usually is a way to move forward through individual negotiations. So why is the wage norm legislation a problem?**

**Serroyen:** The wage norm legislation puts a break on all wages. Not just on wages determined by pay scales. Many employees in managerial or executive positions are paid above or outside the scales. But their wage growth is also capped by the wage norm. Their wages also can't increase by more than 0.4%. Admittedly, compliance with the law is only monitored to a limited extent, which reduces the likelihood of sanctions. Mainly the sectoral CLAs are being monitored. But exceeding the wage norm is also not allowed for wages outside the pay scales. Except for executives working through a management company. They are allowed to invoice what they want.

**But there are certainly other reasons why this is such an important issue.**

**Serroyen:** Wage norm legislation is first and foremost a blatant violation of the right to free negotiations. This right is internationally enshrined in a number of treaties. The International Labour Organisation recognises it as one of the fundamental labour standards and even as a human right. So it is no small matter what the Belgian government is doing. It is blatantly violating international agreements. Those treaties provide for exceptions and nuances. A government can exceptionally and temporarily intervene in free wage bargaining in exceptional circumstances. But the strengthening of the 2017 wage norm legislation went much too far. It is a permanent hold and no longer 'exceptional'. That is why we have filed a complaint with the International Labour Organisation. It would be a serious embarrassment for our country if it were to be internationally reprimanded.

Furthermore, the wage norm legislation is fundamentally unjust and increases inequality. The employees' share in the national income is getting increasingly smaller. It's an international tendency

that we also see in Belgium. The wage norm legislation makes it impossible to tackle this inequality. Without free collective bargaining, employees can never claim their rightful share. Employers call our wage claims irresponsible in these difficult Covid times, which have now seamlessly flowed into the Ukraine crisis. But the truth is that there are winners and losers even in times of Covid or war. Even with those winners, who made sky-high profits, we cannot claim our share of the proceeds. At the same time, the shareholders are reaping the rewards. Dividends have increased sharply. But there is almost no wage growth.

The rising energy costs are an additional problem. They are compensated only partly by indexation, because motor fuels, with the exception of LPG, are not included in the price index. Even a 0.4% wage growth on top of the index is not enough to compensate for the loss of purchasing power. That is not only disastrous for families, but also for the economy.

**If the freedom of negotiation is so important, then why is ACV still in favour of an indicative wage norm?**

**Serroyen:** The indicative wage norm provided the wage debate with an interprofessional orientation. It was an orientation for employers in weaker sectors, or those with a weaker trade union presence, to still allow wages to rise. That's important. We want to transcend the sectoral corporatism and move forward in solidarity, and include the sectors where it is more difficult. The indicative wage norm was a starting point for negotiations. It acted as a guide, without being restricting. It was a bit of a restraint in the stronger sectors, but for the weaker sectors, it was an incentive.

**Wouldn't abolishing automatic indexation create more room for free negotiations?**

**Serroyen:** That's what the employers claim. But it is only true in theory. It would be naïve to think that it will have the same result for everyone. Especially in the weaker sectors. We notice this in the Additional Joint Committee for Blue-Collar Workers. There is no automatic indexation there. Last year, negotiations about indexation took place within the committee. It was eventually set at 2.85% On top of that came the 0.4% wage growth.

But together, that yields much less than an indexation mechanism.

The index increases the gross wage. Employers don't like that. If they want to give something, they want it to be net, with the least amount of taxes and contributions. But those net increases are not taken into account for sickness, unemployment or pensions and, moreover, erode social security even further. We are not in favour of that. We want gross increases.

**Does the trade union have enough of an impact to get such an amendment through?**

**Serroyen:** You shouldn't underestimate our impact. I have noticed that because of our pressure, wage norm legislation has been broken in practice. To a very limited extent, but the 500 euro corona premium will be added to the 0.4% wage margin. According to the latest NSSO figures, more than 1.3 million employees have received that premium. That isn't nothing.

But we want to achieve more, of course. We are increasing the pressure with our petition against the wage norm legislation. 25,000 signatures were enough to force parliament to start discussing a reform of the legislation. In the meantime we are close to 100,000 signatures. That is a very good result, especially because quite a few barriers were built into the petition. To sign the petition, you had to sign in using your e-ID or itsme. The government parties can hardly ignore the strong result. The topic is important to the people. But we are not under any illusions. The government started with the agreement not to change the basics of the wage norm legislation. And that seems to be a concrete agreement. Yet we will continue to bring this topic up in discussions with politicians. There will be new negotiations at the end of the year about wage growth for the next two years. With the current inflation rate in mind, there is a growing chance that we are headed for a 0.0% wage norm, even in companies that make huge profits. We won't agree to that. And we are also already focusing our attention on the next government. With pressure from below and international support for more respect for the fundamental right to free negotiations, we want to change the next government's mind.

# Mental wellbeing

Jan Deceunynck



MORE AND MORE PEOPLE IN HIGHER POSITIONS KNOCK ON THE CAREER GUIDANCE CENTRE'S DOOR

## “There’s nothing wrong with saying ‘no’ from time to time”

“When I opened my inbox on Monday, I immediately closed it and called in sick.” Or: “I couldn’t stop thinking about work. Day and night, during the week and weekends, during my holidays...”

I don’t know about you, but I hear more and more friends and colleagues talking about how they can’t cope anymore. The word burn-out isn’t always used, but the stories don’t lie.

And the Flemish government’s workability monitor confirms that well-being at work is changing for the worse. Workability figures dropped below 50% for the first time in 2020.

The ACV career coaches also see an increase in the number of questions about mental health at work. We questioned them about the causes of this unhealthy trend. And how you can protect yourself.

## Causes

It will come as no surprise that workload is an often stated cause. The bar is set higher and higher. And that sometimes leads to extreme situations. For example: career coach Annelies Dousy was approached by a man who was the only remaining commercial manager in his company, with clients from the US to Asia. "Because of the time differences in that area, he never had any rest. He was globally and constantly available. There was always a customer awake somewhere. The pressure was enormous. But the man was so passionate about his profession that he didn't want to stop. He kept going until he couldn't anymore. And even longer than that. Because three days after undergoing surgery, he was taking phone calls in his hospital bed."

And that brings us to another cause: employees who experience burn-out are very often 'ideal employees', explains career coach Saskia De Bondt. "Passionate. Perfectionists. Loyal. Responsible. Driven. Empathic. Beloved. They never want to say 'no'. They always find a reason to say 'yes': they don't want to disappoint anyone, they don't want to bother anyone else, they want to be sure it's done well ... It is, however, perfectly okay to say 'no'. You are allowed to say you don't want to do something, that it isn't your job to do it. You are also allowed to delegate things. And even as a manager, you are not responsible for everything and everyone."

Another cause is a mismatch between the organisation and the employee. "There are no good and bad company cultures," explains Annelies. "Every system has its

advantages and disadvantages." And she explains that she has already coached managers who succumbed to too much structure, but also executives who couldn't deal with the lack of clarity. There was, for example, a man in a family construction company who changed his mind when the company was sold and the friendly atmosphere changed. But she has also coached managers who needed a clear structure.

"It's important to look for accompany that suits your needs," Saskia explains. "There is nothing wrong with properly screening the companies you're applying to. During the application process, you can ask questions about the nature of the company, the company culture, the job content and your responsibilities. Perhaps you can speak to a few of your future colleagues or try out a day's work. All of that is better than ending up in a company that doesn't suit you."

## It's okay to say no

That brings us to the question of how to find a healthy balance. Prevention is always better than cure, as is proven here as well. Open communication and clear boundaries are important. And that's where the problem often lies. "Driven employees assume that everything is part of their job. But when you ask if they have checked whether that's the case, it turns out they haven't talked to anyone about it. At most, they mention it in passing, without going into too much detail. Or they assume that someone around them will have noticed. But that is often not the case."

Taking sufficient time to relax is also important. "We often hear



people say they have no time anymore for their hobbies. They are, however, essential to keep going," explains Annelies. "No longer having any time for or any interest in your hobbies is an important sign. If you ignore it, you will face the consequences later on."

## Time helps

When things do go wrong, 'time' turns out to be the best remedy. "I was once contacted by a manager who wanted to be back to who he was a week later. But, unfortunately, it doesn't work like that," says Saskia. "Recovery takes time. Otherwise you are just preparing



for your next crash.” But it isn’t always easy. “Quite a few employees, especially those in higher positions or with a lot of responsibilities, feel guilty for being ill. Or they focus on their own role in their crash. Their confidence has very often taken a huge hit. I often hear that they can’t stop worrying, that they keep going round and round in the same circle.”

The ACV career coaches are there to help you. “We will break that cycle together. We listen to their story and make them look in the mirror. By taking some distance from the daily rush and taking a minute to

reflect, most people quickly figure out what the problem is.” And from then on, you can start working on step-by-step solutions. It’s a search for what you want and what you’re looking for in a job. Or what you don’t want. What gives you energy? What takes all the satisfaction out of your job? How do you find a balance between the two? What is your role in the situation? What can you control? But also, what is the role of others or of the organisation you work for?

“Changing jobs is not always the right or only solution,” says Annelies. “Sometimes you can also

rearrange things within your job, make better arrangements on your job responsibilities, provide clarity ... But other times changing jobs or position is the only solution. It will be clear at the end of the recovery process we go through what the right solution is. Together, we’ll come up with a personal action plan with options for the future.”

*Do you have any questions about your job’s workability? Do you want to know more about the ACV Career Guidance Centre’s approach? Don’t hesitate to get into contact. You can find all information on [www.loopbaanontwikkeling.be](http://www.loopbaanontwikkeling.be).*

# Graduates

Jan Deceunynck

ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE  
LABOUR MARKET

## Ready to go

Thousands of students will graduate in June. How do they see their future? What do they expect from their job and career?



“I AM HAPPY WHEN I CAN  
HELP PEOPLE”

**Tia Spiessens** is excited to start looking for a job soon. She hasn't started yet, because she is still focused on her studies. But she isn't too worried about finding a job. “It will be fine. My degree in social-legal services offers plenty of opportunities in professions characterised by labour shortages.”

She does wonder where she'll end up. “How do I find an employer that suits me?” she asks herself. Because, above all, she wants to like going to work. “A good atmosphere is very important to me. As well as good colleagues, because you share an office with them daily. So it is important that you get along,” she says. “An employer who manages their team well and listens to ideas presented by the employees is also important.”

The job content also has to be right. “I chose this degree because I want to help people. I want to help them find their rights in the sometimes complex legislation. Or I want to refer them correctly to services or organisations that can help them with their specific case. That is what I want to do. During my internship, I noticed that it made me really happy if I can help people. So I definitely want to have that social component in my job.”

And in terms of salary? “Well, the salary has to be good too, of course,” she laughs. “But I am realistic enough to realise that I will begin with a starter's salary. And that's OK.”

She'll soon start her professional career, for the next 40 years or so. She laughs when she hears that. “Time flies. Especially if your job allows you to do what you love. And that's what I intend to do.”



### “APPRECIATION MOTIVATES ME MORE THAN A STRICT BOSS”

**Rumeysa Avci** is ready to start her professional career as a marketer. But she doesn't feel entirely confident. “Every company wants people who already have experience, and as I've just graduated, I don't have that.” She also hopes that her foreign ethnicity won't be an issue for employers or colleagues. That fear is hanging over her ambition like a dark cloud.

But she doesn't let those thoughts bother her too much. She is excited to start working. “I know what I'm capable of. I am ready to start working.”

She hopes to find a job in a company that isn't too authoritarian. “I really wouldn't like that.” I am most productive in a structure where my colleagues and I can make a difference together, where I feel appreciated. That motivates me more than a strict boss. I do know that discipline is necessary. But authoritarian leadership is something else.”

For that reason, she wants to be a little selective about where she applies for a job. “After all, it's about my future. I hope to build a long career with my employer. So I'd better find a job that I like.”

But she immediately makes a comment about that long career. “My real dream is to start my own business. A restaurant with a lounge,” she dreams out loud. Isn't that dream something completely different from her marketing training? “Not really. My marketing skills will come in handy there as well. I have noticed that many of my friends and acquaintances want to be ‘their own boss’. That's really popular with young people.” The fact that starting your own business is also a big risk doesn't really scare her. “I really do want to try. If it fails, that's fine by me. But I would regret not trying ...”



### “IN A GOOD TEAM, YOU CAN COUNT ON YOUR COLLEAGUES”

**Evan Wauters** is finishing his last internship period. He hasn't decided yet whether he's going to start looking for a job immediately after. “Maybe I want to study something else first,” he explains. But he might start working, and potentially study something else later on.

In any case, his internship has taught him that work is different from school. “A school timetable is different from going to work every day,” he says. Not that he didn't like it. It was and is a fun and enriching experience. Fun colleagues, varied work. That's what he wants when he starts working. “Variety in my job is very important to me. I can't see myself doing administrative work all day long. But it is part of the job. I prefer to be challenged to step outside of my comfort zone.”

He also hopes for sufficient flexibility. “Not that I want to work in shifts or do night work,” he says. “But I do want the necessary freedom to organise my work so I can find a balance with my private life. I have seen how that's possible during my internship. One day we might work a little longer or we have a meeting in the early evening, but another day we are allowed to start a little later. It all fits together nicely. That is the ideal scenario for me.”

He is aware that, as a newcomer, he will probably have to learn a lot ‘on the job’. But with a good team and a good framework, he's totally up for it. “In a good team, you can count on your colleagues for help and advice. That will certainly be necessary in the beginning. Because as a beginner you have a lot to learn. I hope I'm allowed to make mistakes, but I'm still given the confidence to tackle things independently. That's how you learn the most.”

## **Never work alone**

Quarterly ACV-magazine  
for professionals and managerial staff

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