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# Coping with Occupational Transitions

An Empirical Study with  
Employees Facing Job Loss  
in Five European Countries



PSYCHOLOGIE SOZIALER UNGLEICHHEIT



VS VERLAG FÜR SOZIALWISSENSCHAFTEN



# Job insecurity and successful re-employment: Examples from The Netherlands

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## **1 Introduction**

This part of the project involved two major elements: conducting qualitative interviews with two groups of employees on the one hand, and case studies in several Dutch companies on the other. The first group consisted of workers in an insecure job situation following the (future) restructuring of their company. These respondents were asked what elements would help them in such a situation, and which organisational factors obstructed them in adequately coping with their insecurity. The aim of these interviews was to gain insight in key issues for workers in an insecure job situation, and to develop innovative intervention strategies that assisted employees in coping with occupational transitions. The second group was composed of successfully re-employed individuals having found a new job as a result of outplacement/replacement counselling provided by their previous employer. These interviewees were asked about their experiences with different elements in the outplacement programme and how this support has helped them in recovering from the shock of dismissal and in successfully finding another job.

For the case studies, seven Dutch companies have been selected where outplacement interventions have taken place in the past, that are innovative or can be considered as “best practice” in the area. We have conducted interviews with several parties that have been involved in this process, such as outplacement-counsellors, human resources managers, members of the works councils and representatives of the labour unions, in order to obtain a complete picture of each case. Additionally, we have deployed written sources, such as social plans, company magazines and literature. Together, these cases give a varied and diverse image of reorganisations and the use of outplacement by companies in The Netherlands.

In The Netherlands outplacement/replacement is already a well-developed instrument. The Netherlands represents the country with the highest rates of outplacement/replacement in Europe. As a result of massive reorganisations of large companies in the 1980's and 1990's, outplacement/replacement strategies were put into action to assist workers during their period of occupational transition. Following renewed economic prosperity in The Netherlands in recent years and the sharp reduction in the availability of skilled workers, outplacement/replacement has become less of a curative than a preventive strategy. Since the labour market in The Netherlands is tending toward full employment, companies tend to put greater emphasis on a pro-active, preventive approach (e.g. furthering employability) and less on a curative approach (e.g. social plan). Striving for “life-time employability” is slowly starting to replace the concept of “life-time employment” in the tripartite negotiations between the unions, employers and the government. This is part of a long-term development with the emphasis shifting from job security to employment security. Collective bargaining incorporates ever more agreements about training, job rotation, personal development plans and intentions by the employer to facilitate career management. The two groups of interviewees permit us to gain more insight into the presence and effectiveness of these pro-active measures in The Netherlands. Another tendency that can be detected in the outplacement industry over the last decade is that interventions are increasingly becoming instruments of activating employee self-help potential during critical transitions which go beyond assistance in writing job applications and coaching for job interviews.

## **2 Qualitative study: Description of sample**

### **2.1 Insecure employees**

The sample selection of insecure employees was done according to the criterion that jobs are objectively insecure. Insecure employees can be defined as working for a company where extensive dismissals are about to take place, whose situation is discussed in the media and by the general public. The reference is not to a subjective/personal feeling of insecurity. In The Netherlands, twelve different companies in the process of restructuring and downsizing were selected.

Partly due to the favourable labour market situation in The Netherlands at the start of this part of the research project, it has proven to be difficult finding suitable interviewees within the group of insecure jobs. Furthermore, respondents often were reserved about their participation in an interview because of the vulnerable positions in which they found themselves. Different strategies have been deployed in order to find respondents, ranging from contacting HR staff within different companies, personal network and labour unions, and putting advertisements in national newspapers. In the end, we succeeded in finding a group of 25 respondents that were diverse in type and size of company, age, geographic location, marital status, type of job and tenure. Together, these different interviews provided valuable and diverse information on “good and bad practices” in reorganisations.

The sample consisted of 11 men and 14 women who were employed in different sectors. These include banks, telecoms, industrial and technical manufacturing, health care, education, transport, automobile industry, publishing and reintegration. The age of the respondents ranged from 28 to 53, with an average of 41 years. 15 respondents in our sample were over 40 years of age. A large proportion of the employees (eight persons) had been employed at the same firm for more than 20 years, five persons for a period of 10 to 19 years, six persons between 5 and 10 years, and only another six persons for less than 5 years. The employees were predominantly skilled workers from different job levels.

In the sample there were three primary reasons given for company layoffs: the economic situation in the particular branch, restructuring measures (despite a profitable situation of the company) and privatisation of state activities. The situation in the different companies, leading to the decision of reorganisation and dismissals is described in detail in chapter 3.1.1.

### **2.2 Successfully re-employed individuals**

The criterion for the sample selection of successfully re-employed individuals was having received outplacement/replacement counselling before dismissal and having been successfully re-employed. The counselling should have taken place during the preceding 12 months and be financed and organised by the company, an external agency, or with the help of the labour administration. In order to approach these individuals, we obtained the co-operation of the ‘Nederlandse Organisatie van Bureaus voor Outplacement en Loopbaanbegeleiding’ (NOBOL), which is the organisation for agencies for outplacement, retention and employability. The chairman of the NOBOL sent a letter to all its members, asking to locate suitable interviewees who had been counselled during

the previous years. This procedure enabled us to conduct interviews with a wide variety of successfully re-employed people who had been supported by different types of agencies. In the end, fifteen agencies selected one or two former outplacement-candidates who, according to them, would provide interesting cases to our research project. It should be noted here that this selection method could imply a certain bias in research results, since agencies probably selected former candidates who proved to be positive about the outplacement support they received.

The sample consisted of 27 employees (14 males, 13 females) of diverse backgrounds in terms of sector, age, job level, marital status and job level. The sample includes a great variety of sectors such as education, welfare, health care, ITC, agriculture and commercial, technical and chemical industry. The age of the respondents ranged from 30 to 60, with an average of 44 years. 19 respondents in our sample were over 40 years of age. A large proportion of the respondents (14) had been employed at the same firm for a period of 10 to 19 years before starting the outplacement support. Four interviewees had been in the same company for more than 20 years, four persons between 5 and 10 years and only four persons for less than 5 years. Most of the employees had found a new job recently (< 1 year). The employees were predominantly skilled workers from different job levels.

### **3 Qualitative studies: employees in insecure jobs and successfully re-employed**

#### **3.1 Description of results of the subsample “insecure jobs”**

##### *3.1.1 Situation in the present company*

The respondents in our sample were selected from 12 different organisations. This allowed for both a comparison among different organisational contexts and among different perceptions of individuals involved in the same kind of situation. First, the situation in each of these companies will be described.

The bank where Ms Jansen (NL-IJ-1) and Mrs Pietersen (NL-IJ-2) are both working has undergone several large restructurings over the past two years. Recently, one of the largest operations has started, which is the closure of small, local offices that will be replaced by large district offices. This restructuring will cause the redundancies of over 6,000 employees who will either be replaced within the bank or be dismissed. So far, there have been no compulsory dismissals in the bank's history. What is remarkable in view of these recent reorganisations is that in an economic sense the bank is doing very well. Its profits are still increasing. The department where both respondents are employed will be closed down completely. The major activities of the department will be transferred to the bank's office in London. In Amsterdam, a new department will be created that will conduct an extension of some of the former activities, and function as a mediation centre for the office in London. Of the 450 employees presently working within the department, 200 people will need to find other jobs elsewhere within the bank, or in another company. The other 250 employees will be placed into the new department, although the content of their jobs will probably change.

Mr Karels (NL-IJ-3) works as a technical engineer in the head office of the ministry of defence. Because of the end of the cold war, the Dutch government has decided to cut down severely on defence expenditure. The first reorganisations started in 1989, involving the integration of different departments and the redundancy of a large part of the staff. In the present reorganisation that started three years ago, 400 of the 950 jobs at the head office will be 'reshuffled' and approximately 30 persons will become redundant. Simultaneously, new jobs will be created that require technical know-how and skills that cannot be provided by the employees who have been working at the ministry for many years.

Mrs Haag (NL-IJ-4), Mrs Buur (NL-IJ-5) and Mr Bakker (NL-IJ-6) work for a large national reintegration company that was formerly part of the Public Employment Services. The company received governmental subsidies until 2000, when the market for reintegration of unemployed and disabled workers was privatised in The Netherlands. This change from a state subsidised to a commercial establishment has resulted in the redundancy of approximately a quarter of the employees. Half of this redundancy process has already been solved by means of natural turnover of employees leaving the organisation on a voluntary basis. The other workers will probably be faced with a change in their job content, and an obligation to move to another location. The employees belonging to the job groups that will become redundant will all receive a letter giving them the option of either being replaced within the company or to be guided on a voluntary basis by the internal mobility agency to find another job within or outside the company.

Mr Visser (NL-IJ-7) and Mr Broers (NL-IJ-8) both work for a large manufacturer of ceramic tiles. The company used to have a reputation of being a reliable employer where workers could stay until their retirement. Due to a change in strategy from production-orientation to sales-orientation, and a cut in returns on the foreign market, a large restructuring process was set in motion that resulted in requiring less employees in 2001. Some 90 employees of a total of approximately 400 were made redundant. The population of redundant employees consisted mainly of male, low skilled breadwinners of different age groups. At that time, the company had very limited financial means, and was on the verge of bankruptcy.

Mr Maas (NL-IJ-9) has been working for a large international company that produces medical equipment with head offices in the United States. Recently, the role of the Dutch location has been changed from a production to a distribution unit. The production tasks have been transferred to a country with a more favourable tax system than The Netherlands, which is the main reason for closing down the largest part of the Dutch factory. The reorganisation had caused the forced dismissals of approximately 300 employees. Only a very limited number of workers have found another job within the newly formed distribution organisation.

Mrs Leeuwen (NL-IJ-10) and Mrs Fransman (NL-IJ-11) are both working for a large Dutch telecom organisation with a worldwide network. The increasing burdens of debts, bad economic planning, increasing competition in the telecom branch and negative return on investments have caused the company to start one of the largest restructurings in the history of The Netherlands. Over the past decade, the company had already conducted three major restructurings. At the time of the interviews, respondents indicated that in the present reorganisation approximately 20 percent of the total staff would become redundant, equaling a total of 6000 workers. The goal of the whole op-

eration is to re-establish a solid financial position, in order to be attractive for a potential foreign telecom partner. Recent plans for mergers with foreign companies have not succeeded. The respondents expect the outsourcing of a large number of departments of the telecom company, as well as a merger with, or take over by a foreign partner.

Mr Rijn (NL-IJ-12), Mrs Berg (NL-IJ-13) and Mrs Rivier (NL-IJ-14) all work for a large company that has shifted its core activities from publishing to providing marketing information over the last year. During this earlier reorganisation, approximately 90 percent of the publishing activities had been sold to a foreign multinational. All three respondents work for a magazine that is one of the few that has remained after the restructuring operation of last year. Three months before the interviews were held, the respondents had read in newspaper announcements that the company would reduce its remaining staff by another 10 percent, causing a further 35 redundancies of 350 full time equivalents. The largest part of this shrinkage would be achieved by natural turnover and voluntary departure of workers. The main reason for the present reorganisation was a decrease in publishing revenues in the whole sector following the global economic recession. Since the company was still making profits, the respondents did not understand the reasons for dismissing employees.

Mrs Groot (NL-IJ-15), Mrs Klein (NL-IJ-16) and Mr Smal (NL-IJ-17) work for a national organisation which deals with job search and job matching of long-term unemployed and other groups of workers who have difficulties in finding jobs. With the privatisation of the reintegration market in The Netherlands, the organisation has started to experience severe competition from other reintegration agencies. These changes in the labour market, and the decline of unemployment in The Netherlands, have resulted in a decrease in the number of clients. The implication of these developments is that in the regional offices where the three respondents work, four of the six employees will be made redundant.

Mr Praag (NL-IJ-18) and Mr Amstel (NL-IJ-19) both work for a communal transport company. Last year a small reorganisation resulted in the redundancy of both respondents. Several double posts were reduced to one following the criteria of last-in-first-out. Both respondents were replaced in jobs below their qualification level. They have protested, which has resulted in a job vacuum of one year and uncertainty about the future job position. Till today, both Mr Praag and Mr Amstel have not been offered a suitable new job within the organisation. As for the rest of the organisation, the future is insecure, since the organisation has plans for privatisation that would result in a loss of the civil service status of all employees.

Mrs Leuven (NL-IJ-20) works as a music therapist for a large community psychological health organisation. Over the last decade the different regional organisations which offered psychological health care were involved in several reorganisations. Recently a mega-merger has fused all health organisations of this region in one organisation. The reason for the last small reorganisation, in which Mrs Leuven was made redundant together with twelve other colleagues, was a deficit in the annual budget. The selection criterion of last-in-first-out has been applied. At the time of the interview, Mrs Leuven was still working, although her number of clients had been gradually reduced over the last year. In her free time she used the services of the internal mobility centre to search for another job, either within or outside the organisation.

Mrs Gent (NL-IJ-21) and Ms Raalte (NL-IJ-22) work as secretarial and administrative support employees respectively in a small training institute with several offices



spread around the country. The institute used to receive subsidies from the Public Employment Services (PES) to offer training to specific groups of unemployed people. Since the recent privatisation of the PES, the training institute needs to operate on a commercial basis. This has resulted in financial problems that necessitate the centralisation of the decentralised administration offices. At the time of the interview Mrs Gent and Ms Raalte were insecure about their future within the organisation. They would either be dismissed or replaced internally in a different location. If they were offered a new job within the organisation, they would be obliged to accept it. The selection criteria that would be applied and the content of the social plan were still unclear.

Mrs Rijk (NL-IJ-23), Mr Waal (NL-IJ-24) and Mr Brand (NL-IJ-25) all work for a large international manufacturer of automobiles with headquarters in Sweden. In 2000 another automobile manufacturer at the same location had taken the opportunity of contractual terms to buy out the company where the respondents are employed. These contractual terms implied that the organisation could do nothing to prevent the closure of their offices, resulting in the redundancy of all employees, including the HR department. A small part of the organisation, so-called "key personnel", can stay until the final closure in 2004. A social plan was established immediately following the announcement of the reorganisation, as well as personal development plans for all redundant employees. All respondents consider their employer has acted in a socially responsible manner in line with the culture of the company.

In most cases, the reorganisation has had a negative effect on the working atmosphere, causing much unrest and reduced commitment and motivation among the personnel. Mr Karels states for example: *"There has been an enormous amount of unrest in my department since the reorganisation was announced one year ago. The absenteeism of approximately 15% is huge. The motivation has completely gone. Since we have been shrinking for over 10 years now, we have not undertaken any collaborative actions because everybody's spirit has been broken."* (NL-IJ-3; 33-38; 42-44). Mrs Leuven says: *"One could best sum up things by saying that everybody is surviving in his own way. One person does so by being very angry, while others don't care about anything anymore"* (NL-IJ-20; 58-59). In several companies a competitive atmosphere among employees has emerged in reaction to the reorganisation. Mrs Fransman says for example: *"The atmosphere is not so friendly and amicable as it used to be. Everybody tries to save his own life. People try to create a distinct profile for themselves by trampling on colleagues. People have also become more grumpy towards each other"* (NL-IJ-11; 55-60). In the case of the Swedish automobile manufacturer, all respondents claim that the announcement had no clear effect on the working atmosphere. People still felt very committed to both the company and to their jobs, and the reorganisation had no effect on the sick-leave rate in the company. In most cases, respondents had not undertaken any collective action such as strikes.

#### *Individual aspects*

The majority of the respondents in our sample were afraid, and in some cases certain, of being dismissed in the near future. Also, several respondents indicated that even if they were not to be dismissed in the current reorganisation, they have become insecure about future organisational changes. Mr Broers: *"I already see the next reorganisation coming within a period of two years. The situation of this company is highly uncertain"* (NL-IJ-8; 115-117).

All respondents claim that work is very important to them. Securing an income, being in social contact with colleagues, having a sense of belonging to society, obtaining a sense of independence vis-à-vis their partner, and being offered possibilities for personal development were the aspects that were most often mentioned in the interviews.

With the favourable labour market in The Netherlands, most respondents were quite confident about finding another job. However, they felt more insecure about finding a suitable job at the right level, with nice colleagues and good working conditions.

In our sample, age proved to be the most important determinant in the insecurity about chances of finding another suitable job. Older workers generally felt very unsure concerning possibilities on the labour market when compared to the young respondents. This insecurity was not only caused by the idea that future employers would prefer younger employees, but also by the lack of up-to-date training and diplomas, and the high salary demands they had because of their seniority.

Another crucial factor concerning feelings of insecurity with regard to finding another job proved to be employability as a function of working experience, training and willingness to frequently change employers. The younger respondents, who had never experienced the idea of life-time-employment with their current employer, proved to be more convinced about their possibilities of finding another suitable job. Mrs Rivier says for example: *"I am convinced of being able to find another job because I am young and have already built up quite a lot of working experience. I also know that in my sector it is very difficult for companies to find qualified people for the type of job I do. I am just less convinced about finding a nice job that would please me"* (NL-IJ-14; 87-94).

Also, many respondents show feelings of anger, frustration, distrust and reduced motivation and commitment towards their employer. Mrs Berg says for example: *"Any feelings of loyalty with regard to the management board have completely disappeared. Because my company is quoted on the stock exchange, I know the board could profit from the dismissal of my colleagues to buy their third mansion. So I actually consider them to be the enemy"* (NL-IJ-13; 99-105). One respondent with long years of service explains how his commitment with regard to the employer has disappeared in reaction to the reorganisation. Mr Karels says: *"I used to work with my heart and soul, while now I just don't have any feelings left for the company. If I can leave with a good settlement I will leave everything behind without blinking an eye"* (NL-IJ-3; 55-58).

### 3.1.2 Aspects of organisational justice

#### *Distributive Justice*

In most cases for which the selection criteria had been established, the last-in-first-out-system (LIFO) was used to decide on which employees would be laid off. In some cases, the LIFO principle was applied in combination with the work group. In these cases, the number of redundant employees was established for each work group separately, after which the LIFO principle was applied. Quite remarkably, in our sample, many of the respondents did not agree with the LIFO system, although they did understand the necessity for using this type of criteria in dismissing employees. Mrs Berg states that the LIFO system does not adequately reward motivated, qualified employees. Mrs Berg: *"I do not find it fair for them to apply the LIFO principle, because especially in our case the newcomers are the ones that are most motivated and work hardest. In the selection decision one should take quality much more into consideration. In order to*

do so, there should be more performance interviews" (NL-IJ-13; 145-150). Other respondents underscore the importance of retaining qualified, motivated staff for the survival prospects of the new organisation. Ms Buur: "*Seniority does not imply quality, which in my opinion is necessary to build a new healthy organisation*" (NL-IJ-5; 89-96).

As for the other selection criteria that were applied, respondents were generally very positive about the possibility of the voluntary repatriation grant. In those situations in which employees could decide on who would leave the organisation on a voluntary basis, and who would stay, respondents were positive about the outcomes of the process.

In some cases, the official selection criteria, such as the LIFO system, were not applied in a fair manner. Mr Maas explains for example how the design of the selection criteria did not match with the outcome: "*They threw out all the older and troublesome people. There was no future for them in the new organisation. On paper there was a policy for dismissing workers, but the execution of this policy was not followed. In the letter to the Personal Employment Services, which needed to give its approval of the dismissal, they put false arguments such as the prior performances of the people involved*" (NL-IJ-9; 150-162).

Several respondents report on this mismatch between the formal side of the reorganisation and the actual implementation of the plans. The actual application of selection criteria, communication, replacement and guidance by the mobility centre often proved to be disappointing in comparison with the plans. Mr Praag says: "*They have broken all kind of promises, even agreements that were put in black-and-white. Therefore I have not been treated fairly. Broken promises are crimes with words*" (NL-IJ-18; 133-137).

#### *Procedural Justice*

Those respondents who were given the opportunity to exert influence over the selection criteria, alternatives for dismissals, the social plan and the personal consequences of the reorganisation, were clearly more positive about their situation than respondents who could not give their input. In many cases, respondents reported that their company did not involve employees sufficiently in the reorganisation process. Mrs Buur says about this aspect: "*The management board clearly told us that everything would be top-down. I believe reorganisation should rather start from inside the organisation. The gap between the management and the shop floor is far too wide*" (NL-IJ-5; 101-110).

In most cases, respondents reported that they were not aware of the role played by the works council in the reorganisation process. In other cases, respondents were disappointed about the contribution of the works council. Mrs Haag: "*The works council has not done its job correctly in my view, did not think ahead and has not been watchful*" (NL-IJ-4; 125-132). Other respondents were positive about the amount of influence the works council had exerted on the reorganisation process. Mr Visser: "*The works council has been closely involved in the reorganisation plans and they have had a lot of influence in the results. Although employees cannot personally exert their influence on the process, and the establishment of the plans is done under strict confidentiality, one should feel confidence in the people that have been elected to represent your interests*" (NL-IJ-7; 150-158).

*Interactional Justice*

All respondents stressed the importance of open, honest and clear communication in the reorganisation process. In those cases where the company had communicated in a transparent, honest, personal manner with employees about the situation, the respondents were clearly less insecure about their future, and had less complaints with regard to their health and well-being. Also, they were more motivated and committed towards their employer. One of the respondents, Mr Visser, who was very positive about the communication, reported: *"The current executive manager is strong on communication. He has invited everybody to go carting, to explain in a personal manner what the new organisation would look like, and why the reorganisation was necessary. He has discussed this with us in a very open way. People could ask their questions. One can discuss with him on an equal level. He has clarified every step that would be taken, and informed us thoroughly"* (NL-IJ-7; 120-131).

Another aspect of communication that is emphasised in many of the interviews is the importance of personal, face-to-face, tailor-made communication as opposed to general, global information about the company's strategy. Especially, those respondents with long service expected a personal approach from the company to their situation, and showed more anger and frustration if they were treated as 'numbers' than their colleagues with shorter service in the organisation. A respondent with a positive attitude to his employer explains: *"I got the clear impression that they were concerned about my case. It is part of the company culture to take good care of their employees. We always communicate in a very humane and personal manner. I am sure that they will not leave me out in the cold, that they will do everything to support me in this situation"* (NL-IJ-24; 106-112). Contrary to these positive experiences, many respondents point to the lack of personal information: *"The whole communication is very hierarchical, very much top-down. They [management] should, instead, take people's worries seriously by asking in open conversations with those involved how people feel about their situation, what future career opportunities could be and what kind of support they need to cope with the situation. I really missed that kind of humane, tailor-made, personal approach"* (NL-IJ-3; 110-118).

The lack of a personal, humane communication was more clearly evident in large companies. Especially in companies that had gone through a lot of reorganisations in the past, respondents generally hardly knew their direct supervisor personally. This proved to have an important impact on the way major decisions were communicated to the employees. Mrs Fransman explains for example: *"The disadvantage of a big company is that one runs the risk of falling between two stools. Everybody gets new job positions, so you often don't know your manager. Then you need to be very strong and make a fuss, otherwise you will just become a number and be forgotten"* (NL-IJ-11; 105-111).

The respondents point to the importance of the medium through which the announcements about the reorganisation and dismissals were announced. In several cases, respondents were informed about the reorganisation by the public media. All these cases concerned large companies that were listed on the stock exchange. These respondents indicated that learning about their possible dismissal in the public media gave them the clear impression that the company was more concerned about the interests of the stockholders than those of the employees.

In all the large companies, e-mail and inter/intranet proved to be an important medium in communicating about the reorganisation. Although respondents generally understood that the size of the company did not allow for personally informing all employees about important organisational changes, they would have preferred to receive this information from their direct manager.

Another aspect of communication, that is stressed in many of the interviews is that the company should explain clearly and make it understandable for employees what the exact reasons for the restructurings are. Mr Bakker explains: *"People generally understand that the company needs to cutback on expenditure, but it is important to explain very thoroughly why this is necessary, to show respect for those involved, and to give them the feeling that they are being taken seriously"* (NL-IJ-6; 166-172). Also, the expression of appreciation by the company for the employees involved is an important aspect. Mrs Rivier explains for example: *"What I found very bad is that, from the start, the person who was responsible for the execution of the reorganisation gave us the impression that we shouldn't be nagging. He showed no sign of recognition such as: 'it is not your fault, we just need to cut down costs'"* (NL-IJ-14; 210-215).

Respondents indicate that receiving sufficient, complete and accurate information about important organisational changes and about personal consequences of these changes can be supportive for individuals involved. Many respondents say that after the initial announcement, they received practically no further information on the progress of the plans. Often, direct superiors were not being informed either, which made it impossible for them to communicate with their employees. Several respondents indicate that this lack of information has a negative effect on their daily activities. Ms Jansen explains for example: *"because I have contacts with clients, I need to know what is going on"* (NL-IJ-1; 177-178).

The most important aspect of interactional justice which is underlined by each respondent was the need for open, honest and clear information. In those cases in which the company had communicated in a transparent, honest manner, respondents were clearly more positive about their employer, and reported less complaints with regard to health and well being, than in those cases in which companies were dishonest and secretive about organisational changes and personal consequences.

Respondents indicate, that in order to reduce uncertainty, it is also important for the company to communicate about future plans and long-term prospects of the company. Many respondents felt insecure about future reorganisations. Another aspect of communication is the need for timely information about important decisions. Respondents who were informed well in advance about future organisational changes, and were thereby given time to get used to these changes and prepare a personal plan to cope with the situation, were generally more positive about the communication by their employer than those respondents who were given less time to adjust to future changes. Moreover, respondents who were informed in time about the social plan and the personal consequences of the reorganisation were rather positive about this aspect of justice. In some cases, the company had made a clear step-by-step plan about when important decisions would be announced. Ms. Jansen explains the importance of such a plan: *"Even if it is not clear yet how everything is going to be in the future, it is important to at least have a plan about when that is going to be clear"* (NL-IJ-1; 155-157).

In many cases, the period between the initial announcement and the actual personal implications for employees was extended, because of the time the works council

needed to approve the reorganisation plans. Employees generally showed little understanding if the works council needed more than two months to approve the plans. Many respondents indicated that they would have preferred a less thorough study of the plans by the works council in favour of reducing the uncertainty and being informed as quickly as possible about personal consequences.

Finally, respondents point to the significance of establishing two directions in the communication. Many respondents report that the communication is generally top-down, and that no platform exists for employees to communicate their personal feelings and questions to managers.

### 3.1.3 Employability

#### *Company offers*

The respondents report different experiences with regard to the employability policies of the companies they worked for. Especially the larger organisations, such as the bank, the telecom company, the reintegration organisation and the editorial enterprise all disposed of a very active employability policy aimed at enlarging the opportunities of employees both within the company and on the labour market, by offering them job-rotation, within and between departments, and training.

#### *Individual strategies*

The majority of the respondents reacted to the threat of being dismissed by actively looking for another job. Most respondents did not wait for the definitive plans and outcomes of the selection criteria to be presented. Some of the respondents proved to be unable to start active job search because of severe psychological problems they had developed in reaction to the reorganisation. Other respondents felt unsure whether to leave open the option for internal replacement or to start active job search.

In our sample, elderly employees with extended years of tenure clearly felt less secure about their position on the labour market, and subsequently proved being less active and confident in looking for another job. Mr Karels argues: *"My boss would be prepared to pay for training in order for me to find a job elsewhere, but since I am 53 years old and have a job with a high degree of specialization, it will be difficult for me to find another job"* (NL-IJ-3; 202-209). In some cases, these elderly workers followed the strategy of trying to remain within the company until the age of early retirement. Mr Praag says: *"In this reorganisation, I see that young people leave because of the insecurity, while all the elderly employees remain and wait for a favourable financial arrangement to leave. They do not want to start all over again in a different company"* (NL-IJ-18; 555-564).

### 3.1.4 Organisational vs. individual responsibility

#### *Individual responsibility*

The majority of the respondents indicate that employees have a personal responsibility in both actively searching for solutions in case of dismissals, and in furthering their own employability in order to better be protected in situations of job insecurity. However, the respondents greatly varied in their opinions of how far-reaching this individual responsibility should be.

When it comes to searching for another job, the majority of the respondents argued that employees should have an active attitude in the search for both internal and

external vacancies, in thinking about future career possibilities and reorientation, and in handing ideas about alternatives for dismissals.

As for furthering employability, the majority of the respondents argue that this should be a shared responsibility between the individual employee and the employer. Like the majority of the respondents, Mrs Maas believes it to be the individual's responsibility not to "*rust*" in one's job, but to remain attractive for other employers (NL-IJ-1; 333-338). Some of the respondents argue that employees should have a flexible attitude in adopting to organisational changes, for example, by accepting replacement in a job below the qualification level of the individual involved, although not all respondents agree with this statement.

#### *Company's responsibility*

According to a majority of the respondents, the most important responsibility of a company in reorganisation is to communicate with the employees in an open, honest and clear manner. Mrs Rivier says for example: "*They should be very clear from the start, no matter how hard the message is. They should clearly explain the reasons behind the reorganisation. By explaining things, people will understand: that is just the way it is, it is a tough economic reality out there, so that is why the company needs to take these hard measures. They should just be clear and honest about that. As an employee you are committed, and take care of the revenues, so I believe you have a right that the company communicates in an open and honest way without hidden agendas*" (NL-IJ-14; 401-409).

As for the medium through which important messages should be transferred, most respondents argue this should happen in a very personal manner, preferably by the direct superior. Mrs Berg says, for example: "*The communication about the reorganisation and its announcement should best be done by my direct superior. That is a human way of communication which gives you the feeling that you are not just a number. It also gives you the feeling that it is something that you have decided on together, instead of something that is imposed on you*" (NL-IJ-13; 501-511). Respondents argue that managers should always be kept well informed about important organisational changes, in order for them to transmit the information in a personal way to employees. In reaction to the experience of receiving communication via public media, several respondents claim that employees who are involved should always be the first to be informed.

Furthermore, companies should inform their workers as quickly as possible about important organisational changes and about the personal consequences of reorganisation, keep them informed during the whole process and stick to promised deadlines.

Several respondents claim that particularly companies that want to hire and fire their employees in a flexible way, and will not guarantee job security, should take responsibility in furthering the careers of their employees and support them in retaining a good position on the labour market. According to Mrs Maas, the most important responsibility of the company that can no longer guarantee lifetime employment is to improve the employability of all its employees: "*A good company is responsible for stimulating you to develop yourself, by offering education. They have to reserve money for that, also after this reorganisation. They owe that as an employer, especially to people that have been working within the bank for so long*" (NL-IJ-1; 152-160). Mrs Rijk argues, that companies should take concrete measures if they have no intention of offering lifetime employment: "*If companies do not have the intention to keep an employee in permanent employment, they should make use of fixed-term contracts. People will then at least*

*know where they stand, and continue to train themselves to be attractive to other employers. Otherwise they are just offered fake security"* (NL-IJ-23; 521-529).

As for procedures, respondents argue that companies have the responsibility to comply with legal standards, and to apply rules and regulations properly. These rules and procedures should be clear and transparent. Respondents claim that it is very important that procedures should not merely represent a formality, but that they should actually be executed in a correct way. Several respondents argue that an independent commission should evaluate the way procedures are carried out.

Furthermore, respondents say that the responsibility of the company is to involve employees as much as possible in the reorganisation and its consequences. In larger companies, this should both be done by involving the works council and the unions, and by asking individuals affected for their input and opinion.

With regard to financial compensation, most employees argue that companies should offer both financial security in the transfer to another job, and compensation for emotional damage as well as practical matters, such as moving to another location. Mrs Klein: *"I want to be compensated for the injustice that has been done. Money will not compensate for everything, because I had quite an emotional shock, but at least it offers a basis of security from which you can start looking for another job"* (NL-IJ-16; 399-412).

As for internal replacement, respondents claim that they should have priority access to vacancies in the company, and should be actively supported in searching for another similar job within the company. Respondents disagree about whether employees should be forced or not to accept another job offer within the company, that does not fit their wishes or qualification levels. When a company has not succeeded in offering a dismissed employee internal replacement, the majority of the respondents argue that they should be supported in finding another job by means of an internal mobility centre or an outplacement agency. Most interviewees say that support in finding another job should be limited in time, varying between six months and two years.

Finally, respondents argue that the company is responsible for paying for training that can support the dismissed employee in finding another job. One respondent says that a company should actively deploy its network to create job possibilities for redundant employees.

All the interviewees are of the opinion that elderly employees should receive additional support both in searching for another job and in financial compensation, if it proves impossible for them to find new employment. Some respondents put the line for 'elderly' employee at 45, others at 55.

### 3.1.5 Overall assessment

A wide range of individual and group reactions could be detected in the context of organisational changes and dismissals. On the group level, reorganisations generally had a negative effect on the work atmosphere of our respondents. In some cases, the sense of togetherness increased in the face of job insecurity, while other people reported on increased competition between colleagues. Previous reorganisations with frequent re-allocation of employees clearly decreased the sense of solidarity among workers.

Feelings of anger, frustration, distrust and reduced motivation and commitment dominated among employees in an insecure job situation. These feelings were generally accompanied by decreased senses of well-being and health complaints. In some cases,



these effects led to elevated levels of absenteeism and turnover, or prevented people from actively starting to search for another job. Respondents who felt they were treated in a fair and socially responsible manner by their employer showed none of these negative effects, were still positive about the company they worked for, and felt more secure about their future career.

The favourable labour market in The Netherlands provided most workers with a basic sense of security about finding another job in case of dismissal. However, they generally felt highly insecure about finding another *suitable* job with good working conditions and agreeable colleagues. The level of insecurity was, to a large extent, determined by age and employability. These two aspects proved to be intertwined in our sample. Elderly workers generally disposed of extended working experience, but often lacked the certification of this experience by means of up-to-date training and diplomas. Young employees showed a more flexible attitude with regard to changing companies. Also, they were more aware of the necessity and inevitability of lifetime employability. Large companies generally proved to dispose of an active employability policy by offering job-rotation, training, and active career planning to their employees. Respondents indicate, however, that the individuals have an important role in actively using these facilities. Employable individuals were much better armed to adequately cope with their insecure job situation.

Active job search was the most important strategy deployed by individuals in coping with their insecure job situation. However, elderly workers generally favoured internal replacement and early retirement. Young employees tried to secure their future by leaving, while elderly workers did so by staying within the company. Other strategies for coping with job insecurity that have been mentioned were reorientation on other professions, and becoming self-employed.

#### *What do people expect from organisations?*

As a general principle, respondents indicate that companies should deploy the stakeholder model in the decision-making and handling of reorganisations. That is, the social interests of employees should be taken into consideration in making decisions about restructuring. Reorganisations and dismissals in profitable companies clearly give workers the impression that their interests are not taken into consideration, and only those of the shareholders are defended. If dismissals proved to be necessary for the survival of the company, respondents were more positive about organisational changes.

The most crucial element for employees in coping with their insecure job situation was interactional justice. Open, honest and clear communication about organisational changes had a positive effect on feelings of security, health and well-being among employees. The reasons for decisions with such far-reaching consequences as dismissals should be thoroughly explained to all individuals involved. Early announcement and a continuous flow of information throughout the whole process of restructuring was said to be another essential responsibility of the company. Individuals should be offered a time-out to cope with the shock of their dismissal and sufficient time to search for another job. Furthermore, companies should inform their employees as quickly as possible and in a personal, face-to-face, tailored way about the individual consequences of the re-organisations. Especially large companies with extended histories of reorganisations often showed a lack of personal, humane communication vis-à-vis their employees.

Clear, transparent rules and procedures and a proper application of these regulations, supervised by an independent commission is another important responsibility

ascribed to companies. Also, employees should be involved as much as possible in the reorganisation process and especially in its personal consequences. Respondents were generally more positive about the decision-making if they, for example, were offered the possibility of voluntary repatriation, internal replacement or future job description.

Furthering employability is considered to be a shared responsibility between the employer and the employee. Employees have a personal responsibility in furthering their own employability within the dynamic context of the actual labour market. Companies who can no longer guarantee life-time employment have a responsibility of supporting, facilitating and stimulating this process.

The majority of the respondents in our sample were actively offered training, job rotation and career management advice, in order to further their employability. With regard to company offers to dismissed employees, the majority of the respondents claim that the responsibility of companies is to offer financial compensation, training, internal replacement and support in finding another job. Financial arrangement should provide security in the transfer to another job, and compensate for practical and psychological costs of the reorganisation. Furthermore, redundant employees should be actively supported in finding another job either within or outside the company. Most interviewees say that support in finding another job should be limited in time, varying between six months and two years. Finally, respondents argue that the company is responsible for paying for training, that can support the dismissed employee in finding another job.

### 3.2 Description of results of the subsample “successfully re-employed”

#### 3.2.1 Situation in the former company

Most of the respondents in the present sample have been dismissed following a reorganisation of the company they worked for. Mergers with other companies, increasing efficiency and cutting down on costs were the main economical reasons for their dismissals. In some cases, the reorganisation was used to dismiss primarily elderly and sick workers. In two cases, respondents were dismissed following a labour conflict with their supervisor. Two other cases involved job burnout. Finally, three respondents left their organisation because of a misfit between person and environment. These cases have been included, since an important number of outplacement clients in The Netherlands are dismissed following labour conflicts, burnout or malfunctioning.

In most cases, the reorganisations had a strong impact on the working atmosphere, both in a positive and a negative sense. One of the respondents explained how solidarity and mutual support within his department, which had always formed a tight group, was furthered and intensified as a reaction to the threatening situation: *“From the start, we had told each other: something is going to happen, and how it is going to happen we do not know yet, but we will need to support each other throughout this whole situation. That has really been perfect, I must say”*. Several other respondents state that the work atmosphere within their organisation was characterised by competition: *“In the beginning we did not notice much difference in the working atmosphere. The reorganisation created a sense of solidarity among people. But at a certain point, it became clear who would be assigned to which position, which created winners and losers. At that point, people started to become each other’s competitors”* (NL-IJ-12; 212-214; 34-37).

Most of the respondents had received a combination of financial compensation and outplacement following arrangements in the social plan that had been agreed by the

unions, the works council and the employer. In nine cases, a lawyer had been involved to negotiate support in finding another job and financial arrangements. The cantonal judge settled all these cases. In most cases, the social plan consisted of first striving to replace redundant workers within the new organisation, and if this proved to be no option the plan offered support in finding a job outside the company. The financial settlement generally consisted of an amount that equaled the so-called cantonal court formula (depending on tenure and age). The outplacement varied (in time) between unlimited support by an agency for all dismissed employees and limited (six months to two years) support for individual redundant workers. Most respondents evaluated the measures offered to them as very reasonable and supportive in dealing with the situation of being dismissed. One of the respondents: *"The guidance we received from my ex-employer was very good. I clearly got the feeling that they did not leave us in the cold, which was further reinforced by the outplacement"* (NL-SR-16; 220-222).

Several respondents were offered the possibility to personally make a choice for an agency. They "shopped" around different outplacement agencies to make a choice that fitted their specific needs. One of the respondents states that this is crucial to the success of outplacement: *"I don't think that it is right to impose a standard method; it really has to be tailored guidance, otherwise it doesn't work. In that sense, the choice of the agency is very important"* (NL-SR-14; 181-184).

### 3.2.2 Aspects of justice

#### *Distributive justice*

Most of the respondents claim that the reasons for the restructuring and dismissal of employees were rationally understandable, but not fair. Especially in cases of mismanagement, beyond any control of the individuals involved, but with a severe impact on their personal lives, respondents claim severe feelings of injustice.

In most cases, the last-in-first-out (LIFO) principle was applied to make a selection between employees who needed to leave the organisation, and those who could stay. The respondents show different reactions to this selection criterion. One of the respondents states: *"The principle of last-in-first-out was applied. Since I clearly was the last one to have entered the organisation, it was very understandable that I was the one that had to leave"* (NL-SR-16; 18-32), while another respondent says: *"I find the last-in-first-out procedure unfair. My colleagues who had performed the same job for 25 years, who were completely inflexible and never made a special effort, could stay, while I had to leave. I would find it more fair to select people according to their capacities and motivation"* (NL-SR-25; 301-309). In four cases, the quality criterion, mentioned by this respondent, was applied. The selection of candidates for dismissal was performed by means of interviews with employees in order to decide who would be most qualified for the new job. In all four cases, the respondents experienced this procedure as being extremely unfair, causing personal damage to their self-confidence.

Another aspect of distributive justice that is put forward by several respondents is the access to possibilities for internal replacement. Most respondents state that their former employer has not put enough effort into finding another job within the organisation: *"At the outplacement agency I needed to cope with a lot of frustration that would have been unnecessary if my employer would have put more effort into keeping me within the organisation"* (NL-SR-11; 32-40). Four respondents state that the possibility of internal replacement has obstructed the process of getting over their redundancy, and

of focusing on future possibilities: *"Looking back I would say that it was a pity that I was offered the possibility for internal replacement. If not, I would have approached the labour market much faster, more goal-orientated and with more self-confidence. Without the option of replacement I would have found another job at least four months earlier"* (NL-SR-26; 32-40).

In most cases, outplacement counselling was made accessible by means of the social plan for all employees who were dismissed. In all these cases, dismissed workers could participate in the outplacement programme on a voluntary basis. In nine cases, outplacement was offered following individual negotiations with the juridical support of a lawyer. Offering outplacement was crucial for feelings of justice towards the former employer. Typical statements by many respondents are: *"The preparations to make the decision for restructuring the company and dismissing personnel were not right. What did go right was the end of the process. They have hired a good outplacement agency and the financial compensation was decent"* (NL-SR-12; 85-89). One of the respondents comments on how receiving outplacement can be perceived as a kind of justice: *"Being offered outplacement recovered part of my confidence in the organisation. It gave me the idea that I had accidentally run into the wrong people, but that the organisation as a whole strived to treat its employees properly"* (NL-SR-6; 93-97). Jointly searching for a socially responsible way to leave the organisation, proved to be crucial for the way respondents experienced the dismissals: *"I found it very pleasant that my boss supported me in starting the outplacement, that it was really something we did together. I believe that it is very important to confer with an employee on how he or she can leave the organisation in a good way"* (NL-SR-14; 67-70).

In the interviews it became apparent that job tenure was the most decisive criterion for considering whether the former employer had sufficiently taken personal merits and social needs into account. The following citations support this observation: *"I have been working for the company for ten years with all my heart, and I felt like being packed off home like a little boy"* (NL-SR-11; 43-45). *"They offered me a sum of money, and that was it. I did not agree with that. It was not so much about the money, but more about the recognition for everything I had done in all these years"* (NL-SR-6; 45-49).

#### *Procedural justice*

In most cases, the procedures and regulations for reorganisation and dismissals have been properly applied. However, several respondents report that in their cases, procedures have not been applied consistently. One of these respondents reports: *"There were clear procedures within the branch of how to deal with dismissals, which have been violated in every possible way. They [the former employer] tried everything within their power to try to deviate from these procedures"* (NL-SR-13; 185-193). Other respondents state that strictly following procedures can give a bureaucratic, inhuman character to handling reorganisations: *"They have followed the law to the letter, but I am not sure whether that is always fair. They have followed the procedures, did not play tricks, but that was really all they did and no more than that"* (NL-SR-14; 148-152). Another complaint that was put forward by many respondents was that strictly following the procedures implicated long periods of insecurity for the individuals involved in the reorganisation. However, other respondents claim that redundant workers were not given enough time to adequately cope with the situation: *"The urgency to dismiss people was legitimate, but the dismissal procedure as such was not, because they had not prepared people adequately for such a situation. One could say that it is a kind of fair-*

ness to give people the opportunity to develop themselves, and to prepare themselves for another job" (NL-SR-12; 270-282). Finally, several respondents claim that the procedures for internal replacement were not applied consistently, but depended on personal interests of people in crucial positions in the organisation: *"The content of the social plan consisted of putting effort, both on the part of the employer and of the employee, into finding another suitable job within the organisation. In my case, there has been no effort at all, while other colleagues did succeed in being replaced. My supervisor obstructed replacement, which is something that has profoundly hurt my feelings"* (NL-SR-3; 82-86).

In most cases, respondents who were laid off following the LIFO principle had the feeling that the information used for taking the dismissal decision was precise. In the cases where no clear procedures existed, no precise information was gained for dismissing workers: *"There were no rules or procedures at all. The reorganisation appeared completely out of the blue. This lack of procedures makes one very insecure, and gives one the feeling that dismissing people is possible just like that. As a consequence, one feels completely floating in the air"* (NL-SR-20; 402-409). In the cases where the quality criterion was applied to select dismissal-candidates, respondents unanimously agreed that insufficient information was collected to make this decision.

In most cases, the works council and the labour union were informed to give employees the possibility to correct the decision of dismissing workers. Several respondents indicate that a support commission was installed for the reorganization, to give redundant employees the possibility to contest their dismissal. However, the procedures designed to give employees the possibility to exert influence over the reorganisation and its consequences were not always applied properly. One of the respondents explains how these procedures created a kind of sham participation of employees: *"They [former employer] already had a clear idea in mind of what the new organisation should look like, but they made it appear as if it would be possible to give our input. We had to write down our main tasks, which would form the basis for how many people would have to be dismissed and how the new organisation would be. I can imagine that such a large organisation can't allow for everybody to have his say, but should just be honest about it. That will at least create more clarity"* (NL-SR-10; 444-461).

#### *Interactional justice*

All respondents underline the importance of open, honest and clear communication in case of dismissal situations. One respondent summarizes the issues regarding communication as follows: *"What is really important in the communication is that it is made clear that it is a well thought-out decision. Furthermore, it should be explained to the rest of the organisation how recurrence will be prevented. People in crucial positions in the organisation, such as managers and personnel managers should be well informed and supportive in thinking about good solutions for redundant workers"* (NL-SR-5; 320-330).

Regardless of distributive and procedural justice, communication proved to be of crucial importance for feelings of being treated fairly by the former employer: *"Although technically and financially the whole process has been fair, the personal communication has been unfair to my understanding, which has left me with a bad taste in my mouth about the whole thing"* (NL-SR-20; 387-391). One respondent explains how a good communication with the former employer has softened the distress of being dismissed: *"One has to learn to see the situation as a new opportunity. A bag of money*

won't make that happen. People only want money as a redress for being shoved away, but the feeling of being properly valued lies more in consulting with the employer what would be a good way of leaving the organisation. In my case, this has worked out well. I have really left in a decent manner, and I have no more hard feelings at all" (NL-SR-6; 133-140).

Another aspect that is addressed by several respondents, is the importance of personal, face-to-face information. Respondents indicate that they only received *general* information during the whole process of restructuring, which focused on the needs of the company instead of those of the employees: "*The communication was open in the sense that it was made clear which positions would disappear, but there was little attention or interest as to what this would imply for the individuals involved*" (NL-SR-23; 444-448). Apart from the content of the information, respondents underline the importance of a humane approach in transferring the bad news of the dismissal: "*The communication went all wrong. It is quite a shock to get the message of being dismissed. A sort of mourning process that needs to be handled very carefully follows this. They [the former employer] did not take that into consideration at all*" (NL-SR-1; 155-158). The need for a personal approach in communicating dismissal decisions also became apparent in the medium that was used to transfer the message. Most of the respondents were informed either personally by their supervisor, or received a letter about their dismissal. One of the respondents was informed by telephone: "*I have been informed by telephone, which is not a very elegant manner, so to speak. I had been working there for 16 years, and was sick at that time. In such a case I would have informed the individual personally and not with a quick telephone call*" (NL-SR-12; 37-46).

### 3.2.3 Employability

In our sample, knowledge of how to approach the labour market, application skills and self-efficacy proved to be more decisive for finding another job than the level of education or job position. Gaining insight into one's core capacities, or "*knowing one's own product*", as one of the respondents mentions (NL-SR-2; 334-334), proved to be crucial for finding a new job. Respondents indicate that job-searchers should be capable of translating job-specific and organisation-specific skills in qualities at a higher level of abstraction, that allows for matching a broader category of jobs and organisations on the labour market.

Age, organizational tenure and frequency of change of employer proved to be decisive for the level of employability. Elderly workers with extended tenure with the same employer felt more insecure about their position on the labour market than young employees that had frequently changed companies. One of the respondents says: "*When you have been working for the same employer for a long time, you don't know anymore how things work around you on the labour market. Then it is very important to have some time to get used to the idea of needing to look for another job, to order your thoughts and to be supported in doing that*" (NL-SR-4; 53-60). Respondents who had been working for the same company for many years had a lot more difficulties in extricating their skills, knowledge, working methods and identities from their former employer. In two cases, respondents had been sent abroad by their employer for several years, which caused them to lose contact with and knowledge of the Dutch labour market.

*Company offers*

Most of the respondents in our sample had received training and performed various tasks and jobs within the company they worked for, which provided them with a reasonable level of employability. In some cases, employees had only received vocational training that was very specific for the company they worked for. In our sample, the skill level did not determine the level of employability. The employees with low to middle levels of training disposed of specific technical skills that could well be deployed in other companies. Quite remarkably, some respondents that had occupied higher managerial positions within the company proved to have a low level of employability after dismissal. One respondent who had been working as one of the members of the management team explains that the lack of certification of his working experience caused him problems in finding another job: *"I had performed many different tasks but did not dispose of any official diplomas. I only had a lot of working experience. Someone who is dismissed in a reorganisation, but who can substantiate his knowledge with training and working experience, will much more easily find another job, but this has not been the case for me"* (NL-SR-2; 107-118). Furthermore, the number of broad-based training proved to be important. A respondent who had operated in high job positions in the same company for many years says: *"My employability was quite limited. I had only received a number of vocational trainings which were very specific for the company I worked for"* (NL-SR-12; 109-113). Another respondent explains how the type of working environment in which he had been operating for a long time reduced his employability: *"I had been working in the very protected environment of a charity organisation for 28 years. Although I have had significant managerial positions, I knew absolutely nothing about the outside world. That is why my outplacement counsellor told my employer that my programme would take quite some time"* (NL-SR-22; 91-98). Finally, the dynamics of the branch that employees worked in proved to be important for the level of employability. One of the respondents explains: *"In my branch things change so fast that it is hard to retain people's employability"* (NL-SR-11; 100-102). In most cases, the social plan provided for financial compensation of additional training if this proved to be necessary to find another job. In seven cases, respondents used this option to start broad-based training, such as self-employment, during the outplacement guidance.

Outplacement can be considered as a company offer to further employability of dismissed workers. Developing certain skills to approach the labour market, and translating one's competencies into concrete jobs are the most crucial aspects of employability. Being supported in defining one's skills, qualities and motivations by cutting them loose from the specific working context that employees had worked in for many years, proved to be crucial for finding another suitable job. All respondents underline the importance of employability in the current labour market in which employees are more insecure about staying with the same company until their retirement. Respondents point to the fact that companies should work on the employability of employees preceding the reorganisation process, not only by training and job rotation, but also by offering career counselling. They emphasize that outplacement is a specific kind of employability that should not only be deployed as a curative instrument, but that should be made accessible to all employees in a preventive way. Only one of the respondents had received career counselling by an external agency while working for the former employer. In other cases, career counselling had been part of the annual personal development plans

of the company. In nine cases, respondents indicated having never received any form of career counselling.

Finally, an important aspect with regard to company offers, proved to be perceived fairness of the dismissals. Respondents who felt having been treated in a fair way by their former employer had fewer problems in focusing on future possibilities on the labour market than employees who perceived their dismissal as being unfair. Respondents who had been treated in a fair way by their former employer had generally gone through a shorter period of mourning and disposed of more self-confidence with regard to new potential employers than respondents who had been treated unfairly. If employability is defined not only in terms of skills, but also in terms of levels of personal well-being that enable an individual to search for another job with a sufficient amount of self-confidence, fairness with regard to the former employer proved to be a decisive element in employability.

#### *Individual strategies*

In differentiating between the various individual strategies that individuals deployed, roughly two groups can be distinguished. One group that actively started searching for a new job by looking for vacancies, networking and writing applications, and another group that took the dismissal as an opportunity to take a time-out and carefully considered future career-steps. A respondent belonging to the first category says: *"In the former reorganisation I had learned that one has to start early undertaking things, so when I first heard what the plans were, I have immediately started looking for vacancies, networking and all these things"* (NL-SR-7; 222-225), while a respondent belonging to the second category says: *"For me it was crucial to be patient and to make a well-considered choice for a new job that I wouldn't regret later on"* (NL-SR-17; 34-38).

The most decisive factor in defining individual strategies proved to be the level of self-efficacy respondents disposed of. One of the respondents describes this aspect as follows: *"I have always had the belief that I would find another job. I knew that if I would open myself to new discoveries during the outplacement, to other branches, other possibilities, new jobs and different cultures, it would make me stronger in the end"* (NL-SR-26; 451-457). Respondents indicated that being employable is not only a question of disposing of certain technical skills, but also of the right personal characteristics and attitudes to adequately search for a job in the highly complex labour market. One of the respondents describes these personal qualities as follows: *"I am quite enterprising, motivated and willing to do a lot of things, which makes me an ideal outplacement candidate. Other candidates who lacked those skills found it quite hard having to search for a job themselves. It takes a certain attitude to do that"* (NL-SR-27; 351-55). Another decisive element in being capable of searching for another job proved to be the mourning process over the former employer. Respondents who were treated in an unfair way by their former employer, and especially those with extended years of tenure, proved to be incapable of searching for another job in the period directly following their dismissals. Finally, respondents indicate that the ability for introspection and for being capable of translating abstract qualities and wishes into concrete job profiles were crucial for finding another job.

With regard to their present employers, most respondents indicate that they have become much more aware of their actual and future positions on the labour market. After their dismissals, most respondents had become more active in planning future



career steps and in considering the usefulness of the present job content for their position on the labour market.

### 3.2.4 Responsibility

#### *Individual responsibility*

All respondents agree that individuals have a *personal* responsibility in actively undertaking steps to finding another job when confronted with dismissal. One of the respondents says: *"Employees have the responsibility not to leave everything to the organisation, but to take personal steps as well. People who have been working for the same company for a long time sometimes ask too much of their employer in finding them another job. I do not agree with putting that much responsibility with the company"* (NL-IJ-10; 160-166).

Another responsibility for the individual employee that is mentioned in the interviews is the responsibility to remain employable. Several respondents state that in the present dynamic labour market, individual employees have the responsibility to be aware of their position on the labour market, and to guarantee that position by means of training, internal and external mobility, and active career management. Respondents argue that awareness of qualities, wishes and capacities with regard to work is a personal responsibility of each individual employee: *"I believe that it is an obligation and also a right to think about one's value, one's abilities and one's future development"* (NL-IJ-11; 66-69). Finally, some respondents argue that individuals have the responsibility to re-orient towards different career-perspectives when the proper profession or branch does not offer sufficient possibilities for employment: *"I believe that an individual employee has the duty to look beyond his own specific domain for possibilities of employment"* (NL-IJ-13; 46-51).

#### *Company responsibility*

The most often and most important aspect that is mentioned in the interviews is the responsibility of the company to be open, honest and clear in the communication to dismissed employees. Two respondents commented on this aspect as follows: *"It can happen that a company needs to dismiss people, but I do believe that people should be treated with respect, and that the message should be communicated in a very elegant and personal manner"* (NL-SR-12; 265-268). *"The company has a responsibility in being open. They should explain to people as quickly as possible why and how certain decisions have been made"* (NL-SR-20; 188-192).

As for concrete measures, most respondents agree that companies have a responsibility in first offering redundant employees internal replacement within the company. If this proves to be impossible, respondents agree that dismissed employees should be offered financial compensation and support in finding another job by means of training, outplacement, and support to become self-employed. One of the respondents states: *"A company should take the responsibility of taking real care in the communication, offering a time-out and training if necessary, and offering financial compensation for all the work that has been done. They should do everything they can to support people in finding another job. The nothingness that I was confronted with proved to be fatal for me"* (NL-SR-1; 422-429). Many respondents mention that their feelings of being treated unfair during the process of dismissal was partly compensated for by being offered sufficient measures, both financially and in support for job search, to leave the organisa-

tion in a decent way. As for the amount of financial compensation, most respondents mention that the cantonal formula, based upon years of tenure and age, is a good guideline. In supporting dismissed employees in finding another job, most respondents state that companies have a limited responsibility in paying for outplacement programmes, varying between six months and two years, depending on age and years of tenure, and that outplacement should be offered to all dismissed employees: *"All different job levels should be given access to outplacement. It is a way of showing both in the personal and emotional domains that someone is being valued and taken seriously. I do not believe that every type of job requires outplacement, but I do find it necessary that it is offered to everybody. So it is not so much the question of needing outplacement or not, but the question of having a rightful access to it, which indicates that one is taken seriously"* (NL-SR-11; 333-338). Several respondents state that companies bear the responsibility of giving additional support to elderly workers, who have a weaker position on the labour market than their younger colleagues.

All respondents agree that companies should offer their employees life-time employability instead of life-time employment. By means of training, internal mobility and personal development plans, companies can show their responsibility of guaranteeing the employability of their employees. With regard to internal mobility as a means to further the employability of employees, one of the respondents mentions: *"I believe that employers should be much more active in encouraging the mobility of their employees. They should make sure that people get the opportunity to continue to develop themselves"* (NL-SR-6; 121-125). Respondents indicate that employers should stimulate employability by focussing on the specific potentials, qualities, possibilities and needs of individual workers. *"I believe that an employer should manage the specific qualities of its employees not only to make them stay, but also to make them employable in case they should leave"* (NL-SR-21; 555-558). Finally, several respondents mention that companies have the responsibility to prepare individual workers for the possibility of dismissal. One respondent states: *"Companies should make a strategic choice between wanting to get rid of people easily, but ask for less loyalty in return, or wanting very loyal employees, in which case an employer should be very careful and should put more energy and money in their dismissal"* (NL-SR-6; 205-209).

Another aspect that is often mentioned with regard to the responsibility of the company, is that employers should do everything possible to provide their dismissed employees with sufficient self-confidence in order to allow them to successfully search for another job. Many respondents underline that this aspect of employability is at least as important as the level of skills that is provided by a company by means of training and job rotation. One of the respondents comments on this aspect: *"If rationally, strategically or commercially someone is no longer needed, and needs to leave, one should not take away his or her self-confidence. Every employer should be very much aware of that. It is crucial for the person who leaves to keep his self-confidence"* (NL-SR-2; 294-308).

### 3.2.5 The outplacement measures

#### *Components*

The basic outplacement procedure was roughly the same for all respondents. The first step in the outplacement programme consisted of providing emotional support, either by a personal counsellor or by means of group sessions (or both), to help candidates cope

with the shock of being dismissed and with negative emotions vis-à-vis the former employer. In the next step, instruments such as career and personal surveys, biography, ability analyse and personality profile questionnaires, were deployed in order to deal with the questions: who am I, what am I capable of doing and what do I want? The self-analyses of skills, core qualities, and wishes were subsequently matched with defining appropriate and motivating objectives for the (dismissed) employees that were realistic and saleable on the labour market. This objective should best capture the experience, capabilities, personality and motivation of an individual and should also fit in with current labour market trends. Next, the actual job search was started, with the aim of generating an interview for the candidate. Respondents were supported in training different job search skills. Training in networking, designing curriculum vitae, support in writing a letter, verbal presentations and practice interviews were elements in most of the outplacement programmes. This part of the counselling aims at addressing the questions: where can I find what I want and how do I get there?

All respondents indicate that they have received tailored guidance, depending on the specific goals that they had defined. Psychological stabilisation, self-efficacy, re-orientation and skills training were the four components that were most often mentioned by the respondents. Some respondents needed extended emotional support in the mourning process, while other candidates only needed support in training of labour market skills. Some agencies and consultants put great emphasis on emotional support of candidates. The common idea among these consultants is that psychological stabilisation will automatically lead to getting the right position or finding the right destination. Other goals of outplacement that were often mentioned in the interviews were extensive self-analysis of skills, core qualities and personal wishes that would allow for making a right decision for a suitable job. This aspect can be defined as re-orientation. Other agencies and consultants put greater emphasis on the pragmatic part of the process in "finding a job as best one can as soon as possible". Training of both application skills and specific training, such as furthering self-efficacy and starting one's own business, were elements that were mentioned in the interviews. Most of the respondents received a combination of individual guidance and group training. Nine respondents were solely individually guided in the outplacement process.

### *Evaluation*

#### *Emotional support*

The majority of the respondents indicate that the support of the outplacement agency has been decisive in coping with feelings of anger, sadness and frustrations with regard to the former employer. One of the respondents explains how far-reaching the consequences of a dismissal can be: *"I could live with the fact that I had lost my marriage and my home, but being laid off after so many years of service and motivation is panging every part of one's existence"* (NL-SR-2; 127-132). Some of the typical remarks that were mentioned in many interviews with regard to the support of the outplacement agency in coping with the mourning process are: *"The outplacement agency has helped me to break with my attachment to my former employer. It has also helped in coping with the anger I felt because of the way I had been treated"* (NL-SR-17; 364-369) *"If I have done it all by myself, I would have had more difficulties in coping with the past. It would have taken more time, and I would have taken more frustrations to my new employer"* (NL-SR-27; 345-348).

Candidates used different elements offered by the outplacement agency in order to cope with negative emotions of the past. For some respondents, the support of the outplacement agency in clarifying the experiences with the former employer has proven to be important: *"My feelings and thoughts were a big mess after the dismissal. They [the outplacement agency] have had a significant role in untangling all that"* (NL-SR-6; 159-162). For other candidates, the focus on future perspectives helped them to deal with the past: *"Outplacement surely has an additional value in coping and accepting the past on the one hand, and subsequently using that for future decisions"* (NL-SR-26; 168-170). Another crucial element in getting over feelings of anger and frustration proved to be the furthering of self-efficacy: *"In coping with the situation, it has helped me a lot to focus on 'what do I want' and 'what am I capable of'. This has helped me in turning the button, instead of rethinking the past all the time"* (NL-SR-20; 337-342). For other respondents, the presence of fellow-candidates proved to help them in the mourning process: *"My counsellor has given me many good hints how to cope with the anger and the sadness. Also the contact with fellow candidates helped me a lot"* (NL-SR-23; 277-282).

#### *Self-efficacy*

Most respondents indicate that furthering self-efficacy has proven to be a crucial element in the outplacement programme. Increasing self-esteem, motivating candidates to self-help, inoculation against setbacks and clarifying competencies have proven to be fundamental for finding another suitable job after dismissal. Most respondents state that furthering self-efficacy is one of the main goals of an outplacement programme: *"One of the main tasks of an agency is to make one learn to see one's qualities again"* (NL-SR-14; 92-92).

One of the main means by which self-efficacy was stimulated, was the permanent focus on positive qualities of the candidate: *"The focus lies on things that you are capable of. At the end that makes you much stronger"* (NL-SR-16; 238-242) *"The focus on my positive sides, and creating awareness of what I am capable of, instead of what I am not capable of, have helped me in strengthening my self-confidence"* (NL-SR-6; 168-170).

Another element of encouraging self-efficacy is providing inoculation against setbacks. One of the respondents explains how he was supported in this respect by the outplacement agency: *"When I got rejected, my counsellor told me that it was not the right job nor the right time for me. That helped me in keeping confidence"* (NL-SR-17; 271-273).

#### *Skills*

The different respondents showed varying needs for support in training of job search skills. Training in networking, designing curriculum vitae, verbal presentations and practicing job interviews were elements of the outplacement programme that were offered to most respondents. Especially for candidates with extended years of tenure with their former employer, this type of training proved to be beneficial: *"My skills in writing a decent letter, making a CV and networking had become outdated, because I had been working for the same employer for so long. That is a great advantage of outplacement support: that everything is refreshed which is essential for enlarging the chances of successfully finding another job. Without the aid of an agency, I think it would take at least twice as long"* (NL-SR-12; 200-208).

All respondents underline the importance of one specific element of training in application skills, which is *networking*. One of the interviewees comments: *"I already disposed of application skills such as writing letters and holding a job interview. They have taught me networking skills, in that they pointed out to me that it is not only important to get to talk to the managing director, but also to one's neighbour. Networking is absolutely necessary for getting a new job"* (NL-SR-26; 114-122).

#### *Social support*

All the respondents that received group training as part of the outplacement programme were very positive about the support and feedback they received from fellow candidates. One of the candidates explains how the presence of other dismissed workers has helped him to put his own situation in perspective: *"The crucial aspect of the outplacement was to get to know a lot of different people going through the same situation. It puts things in perspective: I don't have to feel sorry for myself, a lot of people need to deal with the same situation"* (NL-SR-12; 229-232). Another element of social support that is mentioned, is the practical aid of fellow candidates: *"I received a lot of emotional and practical support from other candidates. For example, the network of other candidates can be extremely helpful. Also, candidates coach each other, which is very supportive"* (NL-SR-26; 89-93). Respondents also underline how one can learn from the way other people cope with the situation of unemployment: *"It is useful to see how other people cope with the situation and what is successful for them in finding another job. The group process is very useful in that sense"* (NL-SR-27; 389-393).

#### *Support in job search*

Another element that has proven to be very significant to many respondents is the support in making the right choices for a suitable future job: *"They did not actually find me a job, but I do not think that I would have applied for my present job without the support of the outplacement agency. Without them I would have probably ended up in a job below my level of skills. They have really supported me in making the right choice"* (NL-SR-18; 132-139).

Getting insight into proper qualities and abilities proved to be a successful basis for the job search process: *"One gains ever more insight in to what one's core competencies are, and that is what guides you in searching for a new job, instead of skills and values that one has learned in school, education, salary or a car"* (NL-SR-2; 456-464).

In other cases, the outplacement agency has supported the candidate in becoming more focused in the job search process: *"Because of your own enthusiasm, you want to write too many letters. It is important to get more focused in looking for a job. The counsellor helps you in that respect, in holding up a mirror and learning to read vacancies in a different way"* (NL-SR-7; 367-371).

#### *Job level / age / years of tenure*

Job position, age and frequency of occupational transitions were the dimensions that were most often mentioned in relation to the question whether outplacement is suitable for everybody. Respondents disagree on the utility of outplacement for the lower job levels. One respondent states: *"Outplacement is suitable for all job levels. It all depends on one's ability for introspection, and on being able to formulate what one wants. Sometimes, people with no education are very capable of doing that, while highly educated people sometimes are not"* (NL-SR-22; 121-126). Another respondent does not

agree with this: *"I believe that outplacement is only suitable for highly educated people. Outplacement does not mean finding the same job with another employer, but trying to find a better job"* (NL-SR-26; 179-183). Finally, another interviewee takes a middle position between these two standpoints: *"I have gone through a process that required a lot of self-knowledge, introspection and willingness to open up for negative criticism. A supply clerk does not need this kind of guidance in my idea, but could be in need of support in coping with the mourning process. So it is really important to provide tailored guidance"* (NL-SR-2; 240-252).

As for age and years of tenure, most respondents agreed that outplacement is needed more by elderly workers, and employees that have been working for the same company for many years, than it is for young, highly mobile workers. Even if the former employer guaranteed internal mobility, employees who have been working for the same company for a long time need support in certain skills. One of the respondents states: *"If I would not have received support from an outplacement agency I still would not have found another job. They know exactly what is going on, how to write an application letter today, how to write a CV, what the possibilities are. That kind of support is really necessary for someone like me who had been working for the same employer for 25 years and never had the intention of changing jobs"* (NL-SR-4; 130-138).

#### *Expectations*

Most respondents mention that they had the wrong expectations when they started the outplacement programme. One of the respondents summarizes some of the expectations that were most mentioned in the interviews: *"My expectations were that the outplacement agency would search for another job for me. I also expected to find a job faster, forgetting that it would take some time to cope with my dismissal. I did expect that I would need to do a lot of things myself, but I also expected them to have more contacts, more of a network, while now I think that it has been very good that I have searched for all the contacts myself. So the expectation regarding the speed of finding a new job has not been realised, but the pleasure that I now take in my new job is unbelievable, like a miracle to me"* (NL-SR-25; 89-101).

Finally, respondents had different expectations with regard to the time needed for finding another job. Especially elderly workers often expected it to be impossible for the outplacement agency to help them find another job at all. In other cases, they found a job much faster than expected.

#### *Criticism*

In the interviews two main points of criticism are brought up. One is the lack of active job hunting and networking by the agency. Many interviewees indicate that the access to a network of the agency could be helpful in finding another job: *"I think that it would be good for outplacement agencies to have more and clearer attachments to potential employers"* (NL-SR-13; 222-225).

The second main point of criticism is the lack of tools to evaluate the quality and integrity of an outplacement agency. Some respondents show concern about the possible conflict between the commercial interests of the outplacement agency and the interests of the individual candidate: *"There is nothing wrong with an outplacement agency being commercial, but if they are being judged on their replacement speed, it is crucial that the interest of the candidate remains prior, and that they critically evaluate if the job really suits you"* (NL-SR-17; 222-230). Several respondents point to the importance

of certification of outplacement agencies: *"It is very important to separate the wheat from the chaff in the outplacement world, and that a certifying institute guarantees the quality of the agencies and of the counsellors"* (NL-SR-27; 389-394).

Other respondents showed concern for the 'black box' of the outplacement guidance: *"A number of things were unclear to me. If someone ends up in an outplacement agency, it is crucial that it is made clear what one can expect from the guidance and what exactly one is going to do"* (NL-SR-2; 314-318). With regard to this issue, another respondent states that: *"I believe it is important to develop certain protocols to which all guidance must adhere. It should be made clear in advance what can be expected, which steps one can expect during the guidance, in order to give the candidate sufficient tools to evaluate the quality"* (NL-SR-6; 230-236).

### *Effects*

The most important effects of outplacement that are mentioned in the interviews are the enlargement of employability, awareness of proper skills and abilities, reduction of negative emotions towards the former employer, reduction of feelings of insecurity and a shift in identification with a company towards identification with tasks. The largest part of the respondents indicates that without the support of an outplacement agency they probably would not have found another job, or would have accepted an unsuitable job.

For many respondents, outplacement has proven to be an outlet for coping with feelings of anger and frustration with regard to the former employer. Although most respondents indicate they still have the feeling that they have been treated in an unfair manner by their former employer, the outplacement has supported them in successfully coping with the negative emotions of their dismissal and in focusing on future perspectives: *"I have felt like a victim for a long time. The agency has clearly supported me in getting me out of that situation, and starting to think about the future"* (NL-SR-3; 151-156).

Most respondents indicate that both the experience of being dismissed and the lessons they have learned from the outplacement have changed their attitude towards their present employer. One of the respondents summarizes some of the changes in her work attitude that were mentioned in many interviews: *"There has been a great change in attitude towards my work. I have taken more distance with regard to my current employer. I think that I have developed a healthy kind of distrust. I am committed and realistic at the same time. I am not overly committed anymore, and I pay more attention to my family. My work does not control my whole life anymore. I am also confident of finding another job if this one would come to an end. I do not feel insecure anymore, it is just a job"* (NL-SR-1; 369-377).

Another crucial element of outplacement that is put forward by most respondents is that the process has had an impact on their employability, not only in being trained in certain application skills, but even more in learning to understand and to use their own capacities and possibilities on the labour market: *"I have become very conscious about my qualities and my abilities, and I am capable of putting that into words and to present myself to potential new employers"* (NL-SR-11; 222-225). Awareness of skills, capacities and possibilities has proven to be decisive for diminishing feelings of insecurity in the present job. One of the respondents explains: *"It has given me a sense of security to know who I am, what I am capable of and what I want"* (NL-SR-2; 147-148).

Most respondents indicate that the outplacement support has had a beneficial effect on their feelings of insecurity in the labour market. One of the main explanations for this sense of reduced insecurity is that the outplacement candidates have learned to detach their skills and capacities from a specific employer: *"Now I do not identify so much with the company I work for anymore, but more with the tasks I perform"* (NL-SR-9; 444-446). The idea of being able to use skills in a multitude of working environments clearly reduces feelings of insecurity: *"I feel more secure now, because I have a clear idea of what I am capable of. If this job won't work, I will find something else"* (NL-SR-6; 213-215). The idea of being able to use one's capacities in many different companies proved to be new to several respondents, especially to those with extended years of tenure. During the outplacement they have shifted their focus from lifetime employment towards lifetime employability. One of the respondents explains how his idea of lifetime employment has changed: *"I really like my new job, but if it does not remain that way, I will easily search for something else. I don't have the feeling that it is terminus anymore"* (NL-SR-12; 256-257).

Several respondents indicate that the positive effects of outplacement should be made accessible to other employees: *"Everybody should receive outplacement in a preventive way, to become aware of one's work and choices. It does not only have a positive effect on individual health and well-being, but is also beneficial to employers, because the quality of work will increase"* (NL-SR-11; 444-447).

### 3.2.6 Overall assessment

Respondents who had been treated in a fair manner by their former employer needed less time to cope with mourning over their past, and were able to focus more easily and with more self-confidence on future perspectives. With regard to distributive justice, respondents pointed to the importance of applying procedures and selection criteria in a fair, consistent manner. Moreover, access to internal replacement proved to be important. Some respondents claimed that they had to cope with a lot of frustration because their former employer had not put enough effort in finding them another job within the company, while other interviewees argued that the possibility for internal replacement had only obstructed the process of getting over the dismissal and focus on future career possibilities. Respondents proved to be more positive vis-à-vis their former employer if they considered the reasons for their dismissal to be legitimate and based on thorough information. Respondents were generally positive about the outcome of the social plan. The majority claimed that the process leading to their dismissal had not been fair, but the settlement been correct. Offering outplacement was considered as a fair and socially responsible way of the former employer to show concern for the dismissed employees. Being offered outplacement was therefore often considered as an act of justice.

With regard to procedural justice, respondents showed to be more positive at the beginning of the outplacement when their interests had been considered by their former employer, and if they had been given the opportunity to exert influence over the dismissal decision or its personal consequences. Respondents emphasised the importance of actual, real influence, as opposed to participation of employees as a mere formality.

The majority underlined that communication had been the most decisive aspect of justice, and crucial to their perception of the previous situation. Open, honest, clear, fast and personal information proved to be crucial for both reducing the stress of the dismissal and for focusing more easily on future career perspectives. Companies that



showed concern for the emotional shock provoked by the dismissal, and that communicated in a personal manner with the respondents about the reasons for the reorganisation, and that ensured a good way to leave the company, proved to provoke less frustration and anger among candidates at the beginning of their outplacement. Respondents also pointed at the importance of the former employer expressing his appreciation in order for the individual involved to focus on the future with a sufficient amount of self-efficacy.

In our sample, knowledge of how to approach the labour market, application skills and self-efficacy proved to be more important for finding another job than the level of education or job position. Gaining insight in one's core capacities, and being capable of translating job specific and organisation specific skills in qualities on a higher level of abstraction, that allow for matching with a broader category of jobs and organisations on the labour market, proved to be significant for finding another job. If employability is defined not only in terms of skills, but also in terms of levels of personal well being and self-efficacy that enable an individual to search for another job with a sufficient amount of self-confidence, fairness with regard to the former employer proved to be a decisive element in employability. Respondents claim that coping with the past proved to be a prerequisite for being able to focus on future career possibilities.

In our sample, age, years of tenure and frequency of change of employer proved to be most decisive for the level of employability. Elderly employees with extended years of tenure with the same employer felt more insecure about their position on the labour market than young employees who had frequently changed companies. Not the frequency of occupational transitions, but rather the frequency of changing employers proved to be decisive for the level of employability. Respondents who had been working for the same company for many years had more difficulty in extricating their skills, knowledge, working methods and identities from their former employer.

Outplacement can be considered as a company offer to further employability of dismissed workers. Being supported in defining one's skills, qualities and motivations by cutting loose from the specific working context that employees had worked in for many years, proved to be crucial for finding another suitable job. All respondents underlined the importance of employability in the current labour market in which employees are more insecure about staying with the same company until their retirement. Respondents stressed that outplacement is a specific kind of employability that should not only be deployed as a curative instrument, but that should be made accessible to all employees in a preventive manner.

The majority of the respondents argued that the responsibility of the individual is to continuously work on employability, and to actively search for future career options in case of dismissal. The most important responsibilities of the employer are to communicate in an open, honest, fast and clear manner about the situation, to apply procedures in a fair manner, to offer internal replacement, training, financial compensation and outplacement, and to offer possibilities for stimulating the employability of employees. All respondents agreed that companies should not so much offer life-time employment to their employees, but life-time employability by means of training, internal mobility and personal development plans.

People need different types of support to effectively help them in finding another job. In some cases, psychological stabilisation and furthering self-efficacy proved to be effective, while other respondents benefited from support in re-orientation or skills

training. Therefore, tailored guidance is crucial for the success of outplacement. The main effects of outplacement that are mentioned in the interviews are: enlargement of employability, knowledge of application skills, awareness of proper skills and abilities, reduction of negative emotions towards the former employer, reduction of feelings of insecurity and a shift in identification with a company towards identification with tasks. The largest part of the respondents indicate that without the support of an outplacement agency they probably would not have found another job, or would have accepted an unsuitable job.

In our sample, especially employees who had been working with the same company for a long time, and workers who felt that their former employer had treated them very unfairly, needed extensive support in the mourning process over their dismissals and in rebuilding self-confidence. Support in training application skills proved to be most necessary for people with extended years of tenure in the same company. Elderly workers proved to benefit most from support in furthering self-efficacy and in re-orienting towards different career possibilities, since they often felt most insecure about their position on the labour market. Outplacement proved not to be suitable for employees who would have preferred support in active job hunting and matching or extended psychological support.

The majority of the respondents indicated that the support of the outplacement agency had been crucial in coping with feelings of anger, sadness and frustrations with regard to the former employer. Emotional support, focus on future perspectives, and support from fellow-candidates proved to help respondents in this process. Most respondents indicated that furthering self-efficacy had proven to be a crucial element in the outplacement programme. Increasing self-esteem, focusing on qualities, motivating candidates to self-help, inoculation against setbacks and clarifying perceived competencies had proved to be decisive for finding another suitable job after dismissal. In most cases, elements of the application-skills training, such as training in networking, designing resumes, verbal presentations and practicing job interviews, proved to be important. Respondents who had received group training as part of the outplacement programme were very positive about the emotional and practical support and feedback they had received from fellow candidates. Finally, support in job search by means of clarification of core competencies and motivation, and of structuring and focusing the job search, proved to be a significant element of the outplacement programme for many respondents.

The lack of active job hunting and networking by the outplacement agency, and lack of tools to evaluate the quality and integrity of an agency, were the most important criticisms that respondents put forward.

### **3.3 Conclusions**

Dutch companies generally consider it their responsibility to support redundant employees in terms of material compensation, training and outplacement/replacement measures. Depending on the economic situation of the companies involved, social plans generally include favourable arrangements to support dismissed workers during their period of occupational transition. Also, the formal procedures and basic laws are strictly adhered to in most cases. However, the social responsibility of companies with regard to more immaterial or psychological effects of job insecurity can still be greatly improved.

The most crucial issue in this respect proves to be communication. Open, honest, clear, personal and timely communication about organisational changes has a positive effect on feelings of insecurity, health and well-being. These, in turn, determine an individual's level of employability and ability to focus on future career possibilities with a sufficient amount of self-confidence. In considering laws and guidelines for protecting and supporting individuals in occupational transitions, it seems to be important to understand how the social responsibility of companies with regard to interactional justice can be secured. Information is of essential importance to workers in adequately coping with job insecurity. European guidelines with regard to formal procedures and concrete arrangements such as financial compensation, training and outplacement/replacement should not discard the importance of this issue.

The processes of reorganisation and outplacement are closely intertwined. Employees who are treated in a fair manner during the process of reorganisation experience fewer difficulties in the phase of an occupational transition. They need less time to cope with negative feelings towards their employer and can more easily focus on future career perspectives. In considering social responsibility of companies in the context of reorganisations and dismissals, this seems to be an important issue. Outplacement should best not be deployed as an instrument to repair the psychological damage and self-confidence of an individual who was treated in an unfair manner by his or her former employer. Companies who treat their redundant workers in a socially responsible manner can prevent this kind of damage. In such a case, outplacement can become an opportunity to carefully consider future career steps assisted by the right time, instruments and professional assistance to do so.

Outplacement should best not be understood as an isolated intervention, but should rather form part of an integrative set of instruments deployed by companies to assist their workers in the current dynamic labour market context. Outplacement can be considered as one measure among others to further the employability of individual workers. One could state that in a best case scenario, with a well-developed employability policy outplacement could become obsolete. Training, internal mobility, preventive career counselling and personal development plans will generally support individuals in guaranteeing a good position on the labour market and in developing the flexible attitude needed to cope with occupational transitions more easily.

#### **4 Cases of good practice: Description of sample**

Seven Dutch companies have been selected where outplacement/replacement interventions had taken place in the recent past that could be considered as "best practices" or innovative in the area. The case studies encompass a great diversity of strategies in dealing with situations of reorganisation, redundancy and dismissal. The profiles of the different companies, as well as the reasons for restructuring, vary greatly. It is interesting to compare how a company on the verge of bankruptcy deals with dismissing employees in a socially responsible manner despite severe budgetary restrictions, as opposed to a profitable organisation that dismisses workers for other than economic reasons. Several parties involved (e.g. labour unions, HR managers, general managers and outplacement counsellors) were asked which elements could set examples for other companies that want to deal with reorganisations and dismissals in a human and fair

manner. Additionally, written sources, such as social plans, company magazines and literature, were deployed. Together, these cases give a varied and diverse image of reorganisations and the use of outplacement by companies in The Netherlands. Four of these were selected for to be included in this volume.

## 5 Cases of good practice in outplacement/replacement

### 5.1 Examples of good practice: “Work and Matching RDM” Start Diensten (Start Services) – Rotterdamsche Droogdok Maatschappij (RDM)

#### 5.1.1 Characteristics of the company

The company “Start” originates from an initiative of the social partners – employers, employees and governmental authorities. Start Services is a sister organisation of the temporary employment agency Start. Whereas the main focus of the temporary employment agency is to find suitable candidates for the employment offers on the labour market, Start Services offers outplacement activities with the aim of finding a job that matches with the profile and wishes of the dismissed employee. These outplacement activities consist of both guidance and job placement of mostly low-skilled and blue-collar workers.

Until April 1996, Start consisted of a tripartite direction of governmental authorities, employers and employees. With the start of the economic growth in The Netherlands in 1994, accompanied by a strong decline in the number of mass dismissals, the organisation of Start has changed. Start Services, currently named Start Career Intervention, is now mainly focused on individual career management and the reintegration of (partly) disabled workers.

The outplacement counsellors have varying qualifications. For the project “Work and Matching” (in Dutch: “Werk en Bemiddeling”) at the Rotterdamsche Droogdok Maatschappij (RDM), that will be discussed here, a team of seven counsellors was composed. The team consisted of qualified HR professionals having considerable experience in job placement activities, and technical specialists. A dismissed RDM manager contributed to matching the backgrounds and specific technical skills of the outplacement candidates to the demands of the labour market. Astrid Zwaan, former team manager and intermediary/counsellor of “Work and Matching” for Start Services, states: *“This variation in qualification of the counsellors was the main strength of the team. The input of the technically skilled counsellors was not only important in finding suitable jobs for the candidates, but also in empathizing with them and gaining their credibility”*.

The concept of “Work and Matching” was developed as a joint intervention of employers, labour unions, the Public Employment Services (PES), the Insurance Administration Office (GAK) and Start Services. Gert-Jan den Besten, union leader at the Christian Dutch Labour Union (Christelijk Nederlandse Vakvereniging, CNV) for the metal and electronic branch, explains that the concept of “Work and Matching” has been embraced as *“the third generation”* social plan. The first generation of social plans integrated financial and legal aspects in procedures regarding dismissals. In the second

generation social plans, outplacement was integrated as an instrument to support dismissed workers in finding another job. In the third generation social plans, active job search and job placement by an external party is added.

In the case of RDM, Start Services and the local PES were jointly responsible for both the execution and coordination of the project. As part of the steering committee, representatives of the GAK, the labour unions involved, RDM and the insurance board for the metal and electronics industries (BV 10), cooperated with Start and the PES in the coordination, supervision and evaluation of the project. The RDM project was financed from three different sources:

- supplements paid by RDM based upon agreements in the social plan;
- earnings from employment executed under the authority of Start Services;
- social security benefits (i.e. for unemployment, sickness and disability).

### *5.1.2 Overview of measures: components and scope*

The central idea of the concept of "Work and Matching" is the combination of job placement, e.g. active job search and networking of the outplacement agency and the ex-employer, on the one hand and guidance, e.g. training, individual counselling and emotional support on the other. Following the term of notice, dismissed workers are offered a so-called "labour contract with postponed performance obligation" (in Dutch: MUP contract) by Start Services for a period of two years during which candidates are offered tailored counselling, training and (temporary) jobs. Temporary jobs are employed as one of the main strategies of helping candidates finding a permanent job. During the period of inactivity, the employee receives unemployment pay. Participation in this labour pool is on a voluntary basis. The concept allows for a transfer from work to work, instead of searching for a job while being unemployed. The general goal of the project is not only to support dismissed employees in finding another job as quickly as possible, but also to retain a newly acquired job in order to prevent candidates from having to fall back on unemployment benefits. Another objective is to preserve the experience and expertise of dismissed workers within the branch.

The concept was first successfully applied in 1993 for supporting dismissed employees of the Group of Technical Installations (in Dutch: Groep Technische Installaties, GTI) in finding new jobs, and has subsequently been implemented in a number of other large restructuring operations like those of Fokker, RDM and Stork. The initial goal of the project for GTI was to maintain ties with their dismissed employees, in order to draw from this pool of skilled, well-known workers in the event of new vacancies. For the dismissed worker the main advantages of participation in the project are:

- receiving personal assistance in finding a new job;
- preserving professional skills and employment rhythm;
- preserving entitlement to unemployment benefits;
- preventing workers from feeling pushed out.

The implementation of the "Work and Matching" concept in the restructuring of RDM in 1994 was extensively recorded and evaluated. RDM is a large company in the metal engineering sector located in Rotterdam. Following a decline in the demand for non-nuclear submarines in the eighties, the number of RDM workers was reduced from 3,500 to 1,200. During the last reorganisation of 1994, 235 employees were made re-

dundant. At that time, the labour market situation in the metal branch was difficult. In the period between 1991 and 1994, employment in the metal industry sharply declined by 9 %. In the period between September 1994 and February 1997, a total of 180 workers participated on a voluntary basis in the labour pool. The Social Plan provided financial incentives for encouraging redundant employees to participate. For the remaining employees a dismissal permit was applied for.

The group of dismissed RDM employees that participated in the "Work and Matching" project consisted mainly of male (95 %), low-skilled technicians (79 %) with an average age of 44. Astrid Zwaan describes the group as *"metalworkers that were proud of their craftsmanship with long term employment at RDM, never complaining or being ill and all living in the same neighbourhood"*.

The project was introduced to RDM employees by means of extended information sessions, in which the labour unions and the works council played an important role. Rob Kars, manager of Start Services and one of the originators of the "Work and Matching" concept, explained that initial distrust among RDM employees had to be taken into account: *"This group of dismissed workers showed an enormous distrust towards the employer they had worked for all these years. This distrust had to be converted into a voluntary choice to participate in the 'Work and Matching' project and to have confidence in Start for helping them in their job search. This is quite difficult, and one needs a strong team to deal with it. One should carefully and extensively explain the contents of the project and gain trust in order to convince people to participate"*.

The project team, consisting of seven intermediaries/counsellors and three salary administrators, was located in an office at the RDM domain during the first nine months of the project. The temporary employment agency Start Techniques was also present at this location to provide for relevant vacancies. This internal location allowed RDM employees to start their job search during their period of notice. Zwaan: *"They could just walk in during their break and start looking for another job"*.

During the first months of the project the main focus of the counsellors was the job search and job placement for candidates with "easy profiles". The acquisition of vacancies was one of the main tasks of the project team during this period. The network of Start temporary employment agency, PES and contacts of RDM (e.g. clients, suppliers and competitors) was actively drawn on to find new jobs for the candidates. Furthermore, approximately 3,000 companies were approached by means of mailing actions. Over 40 employees found new jobs during their term of notice. Another group of workers found temporary employment by means of the so-called "fellow lending method". This method allowed workers to retain their contract at RDM while working for a similar company. The financial means that were generated this way were deployed for education and training of employees with difficulties in finding a new job.

After an intake, the remaining candidates were assigned to a personal intermediary/counsellor, whose main tasks were to guide participants throughout the whole process of job search, and to actively search for and play an intermediary role in finding a new job, thus functioning as "a personal temporary employment agency". During the first months of the project, emotional support was offered by means of personal conversations between the counsellors and the participants. Zwaan: *"These people certainly did not wear their heart on their sleeve. We first had to gain their trust by listening to them. We just let them tell their stories without trying to make them turn their heads towards the future, because they were still completely attached to RDM"*. Because of

the extended years of tenure much support was needed. Participants had to deal with the loss of their jobs and summon the willingness to start a job in a new context. The acceptance of the new situation is a crucial element in the outplacement process: *"...it is only by accepting the new situation that participants can be made aware that they can do more than they think. Re-establishing one's self-confidence is the most important condition for finding motivation and exploring new initiatives"* (Start, 1997, p.13).

Following this period of psychological stabilisation, individual profiles were drawn up for each candidate, in which inventories were made of specific skills, work-experience, and personal qualities and wishes. Subsequently, candidates were supported by the intermediary/counsellor in finding a suitable job by actively matching the profile to demands in the labour market. Drawing on networks, monthly individual guidance in application activities, and additional broad-based and specific technical training were integrated into the so-called Individual Guidance. In the course of the project, it had become apparent that such a structural approach was needed to adequately support the group that had not yet succeeded in finding another job.

The training that was offered varied from basic courses of Dutch, word processing programmes, starting self-employment, to specific technical training of Autocad and the acquisition of safety certificates. The broad-based education was generally offered by the PES, while the technical training of employees was taken care of by the internal training centre of RDM. Furthermore, most of the candidates possessed little or no application skills. Six group sessions were organised by the PES. Three sessions consisted of training in basic application skills. In three additional sessions, these skills could be put into practice and experiences between candidates could be exchanged. The social support from former colleagues had proved to be an important aspect of these sessions (Start, 1997, p.14). The mobility centre offered candidates access to vacancies of PES and newspapers, computers and software programmes, for developing application skills.

Finally, the idea of "one counter" taking over all administrative paperwork from candidates, was crucial for the success of the project. The co-ordination of the different flows of money (e.g., payment of posting, unemployment benefit pay, sickness leave payments) was taken over by Start, which relieved candidates of complex administrative paperwork between periods of work and inactivity. Donald Heckscher, former secretary of the insurance board for the metalworking and electronics industries (BV 10), explains: *"A very important aspect of the social plan was to make sure that these people would not have to go through the bureaucracy"*. Zwaan: *"We had a number of salary administrators in our team who offered clarity to the candidates and who allowed them to lay aside the burden of addressing all different counters that one is confronted with when losing one's job. This allowed candidates to totally focus on finding a new job"*.

After having found a new job, candidates were followed up for another two months. Employees who had not succeeded in finding another job at the end of the project were personally introduced to their intermediary at the GAK, the PES and Start temporary employment agencies. Furthermore, they were informed about possible institutions and administration that they would be confronted with.

### 5.1.3 Evaluation

On the whole, the project "Work and Matching" has been very successful. The integration of different techniques (e.g. job placement, counselling, training), the successful collaboration of different parties involved, the intensive guidance individually tailored

to the persons and the taking over of administrative paperwork, contributed to 92 % of the candidates finding another job within two years after the start of the project. A study by the GAK (Doodeman & Halfhide, 1997) shows that the period of inactivity of ex-RDM-employees was 60 % lower compared to a control group of dismissed workers within the same branch that were not involved in the project, leading to a saving in expenditures on unemployment benefits of more than EUR 2.7 million.

The following aspects were crucial for the success of the project:

- Combination of personal psychological and practical guidance on the one hand and active job search and job placement by the outplacement agency on the other hand;
- Tailored guidance and integration of different techniques in a structured programme: personal guidance, group training of application skills, broad-based and technical training;
- Use of networks of the different parties involved (Start, Public Employment Services, and RDM);
- Temporary jobs as a strategy to finding permanent positions;
- Personal motivation of most candidates to finding another job;
- Composition of the project team, integrating counsellors of different technical and HRM backgrounds;
- Willingness of BV10 and GAK to apply the rules of the Law on Unemployment flexibility;
- Dedication, enthusiasm and motivation of all parties involved in this “new and innovative” project;
- Successful cooperation between parties involved: RDM, Start, PES, BV10, GAK, and labour unions;
- Administrative effectiveness: creation of “one counter” taking over all administrative paperwork;
- Economic growth and increase of number of vacancies starting in 1994;
- Willingness of companies in the metal branch to retain knowledge, skills and experience of dismissed employees within the sector.

The most important barriers mentioned by the respondents are the initial distrust towards the outplacement agency by the RDM employees, the level of qualification and age, and legislation. Zwaan explains that a large part of the candidates were low-skilled and elderly employees, but “*we’ve never attached much importance to these barriers. We considered them to be a given fact for which we needed to find a solution*”. As for the legal barriers, Donald Heckscher explained that giving people the right to receive unemployment benefits also brings obligations. The question whether RDM employees that were offered a contract by Start and receiving unemployment benefits in periods of inactivity, could be characterised as “culpable unemployed” and proved difficult to solve from a juridical perspective. Another obligation of the Unemployment Insurance Act, namely the obligation for frequent application, also proved to be inconsistent with the “Work and Matching” programme that incorporates, for example, a period of grievance during which candidates do not actively search for another job. Heckscher states: “*We should be able to deal with legislation in a flexible manner in order to realise these kind of projects*”.



The concept of “Work and Matching” has been applied to a great number of reorganisations in The Netherlands. Towards the end of the RDM-project in 1997, some 1500 dismissed employees from other companies were participating in a “Work and Matching” project. While initially mainly large companies offered these services to their employees, several branch agreements now also provide workers in SMEs with the benefits of the programme. Over the last years, following the strong decline of mass dismissals in The Netherlands, the programme has been applied to a lesser extent, with more emphasis being put on the reintegration of (partly) disabled workers and individual career guidance.

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#### *Interview partners*

- Ms Astrid Zwaan, Start Services, former intermediary/counsellor and team-manager of “Work and Matching”.
- Mr Rob Kars, Start Services, former manager of Start Services and one of the originators of the “Work and Matching” concept.
- Mr Donald Heckscher, former secretary of the insurance board for the metal- and electro technical industries (BV 10).
- Mr Gert-Jan den Besten, Dutch Christian Union (In Dutch: Christelijk Nederlandse Vakvereniging CNV) for the metalworking and electronics branch, union leader.

## **5.2 Examples of good practice: Kliq Employability – Trega**

### *5.2.1 Characteristics of the company*

Originating from the Public Employment Services (PES), Kliq was founded in 1999 in response to the privatisation of the reintegration activities for unemployed and disabled workers in The Netherlands. Kliq consists of two major business units: Reintegration and Employability. Reintegration aims at supporting unemployed and disabled workers in finding a job. Employability aims at supporting transfers from one job to another. Outplacement, career counselling and coaching are the main activities of this business unit. Kliq Employability has become the new organisation for the Bureau Outplacement, the former outplacement agency of the PES.

Kliq Employability does not aim at a specific target group or branch, and disposes of different products to support various groups of employees in their transfer to other jobs. In practice, much of the outplacement candidates of Kliq are low to middle skilled workers.

The central aim of the outplacement programmes offered by Kliq is to further the self-efficacy of the candidates. Nadine Scheepers, career counsellor/senior coach at Kliq

Employability, explains: *"We find it very important that the people involved make their own choices. That way, individuals are motivated when they start working, and it offers inoculation against possible setbacks. However, we do see a tendency that ever more people start asking us for an active role in job search and matching. We are prepared to do this, but the point of departure remains the same: it is up to the individual to make a move, and we should not take over all the work"*.

### 5.2.2 Overview of measures: components and scope

Trega International B.V. is a producer of ceramic tiles located in Maastricht, in the Southern part of The Netherlands, that disposes of a European distribution network. Trega was formerly known as Sphinx Tiles that was founded over 100 years ago. Due to a change in strategy from being production-orientated to being sales-orientated, and a cut in returns on the German market, a large restructuring process was set in motion that ended in shrinkage of personnel in 2001. Some 90 employees were made redundant. At that time, Trega had very limited financial means. Hettie Kijzer, union leader at the Dutch Confederation of the Trade Union Congress (Federatie van Nederlandse Vakverenigingen, FNV Bondgenoten) for the process industry, states that the unions had feared a bankruptcy of the company. Despite the limited budget, the social plan provided for outplacement support. Paul Leenders, General Director ad interim at Trega, explains: *"Given the tight financial basis, we have striven to find a way to make the reorganisation acceptable, both from an economical as from a social point of view"*.

The population of redundant employees consisted mainly of male, low skilled breadwinners of different age groups. Kijzer: *"Sphinx used to stand for solidity in Maastricht. It used to be a typically settled down type of company, where people started working when they were fifteen years old and remained until their retirement. There was little fear of being booted, and if that was the case, people could count on Sphinx for doing that in a socially sound manner"*. Having performed relatively simple routine tasks in a very specific branch, most of the candidates proved to be hardly employable at the time of their dismissal. Kijzer: *"Outplacement is most important for the most vulnerable group of elderly, low skilled workers. They really need the support of an outplacement counsellor, because someone who has been working in a tile factory for 25 years, starting at the age of 15, really does not know how to apply for a new job"*. Leenders explains that the choice for Kliq was, apart from budgetary considerations, largely based upon the profile of the population: *"Because Kliq issues from the PES, they operate in a segment of the labour market that seemed to correspond best to our population of low skilled production employees"*. The works council, the labour unions and the direction of Trega jointly voted for Kliq following presentations of four different agencies.

The general goal of the outplacement programme was to support redundant employees in finding a new job. Employees were entitled to outplacement support for a maximum period of one year. Redundant worker could participate in outplacement activities on a voluntary basis. Most of the employees started the outplacement programme during their period of notice.

The outplacement programme started with a general introduction, during which employees were informed about the content of the programme. Subsequently, intakes were held with all employees and individual profiles were drawn up in order to categorise the candidates into three possible forms of guidance of three, six and twelve

months. Leenders comments that if Trega would have had more financial means the company would have opted for more individual, tailor made guidance. In the specific case of Trega, elements of the outplacement programme were clustered in order to cut down expenses. A five-day group training in application strategies and skills was organised, followed by training in approaching the labour market and looking for jobs and vacancies. This phase was followed by active job search and matching. Trega had specified in the contract that Kliq would support candidates in actively approaching potential employers. Kijzer states that this is an important aspect of the outplacement programme: *"In my opinion outplacement generally does not pay enough attention to job hunting and matching. At Trega's some people really are in need of more support than aid in writing a letter. They need a network and someone that helps them in searching for jobs"*.

### 5.2.3 Evaluation

Five months after the start of the programme, the final results cannot yet be evaluated. Kliq claims that their outplacement support usually leads to 85 % of the candidates finding another job within one year.

Notable about the Trega case is how the company succeeded in arranging outplacement activities for its redundant employees with limited financial means. Clustering and standardising part of the outplacement activities, while still allowing for additional support for the most vulnerable employees, were efficient ways to save on costs.

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#### Interview partners

- Mr Paul Leenders, Trega International B.V., General Director, Ad Interim.
- Mr Jan Tap, Trega International B.V., chairman of the Works Council.
- Mr Weck, Trega International B.V., Director HR.
- Mrs Hetty Kijzer, Dutch Confederation of the Trade Union Congress (Federatie van Nederlandse Vakverenigingen, FNV Bondgenoten) for the process industry, Union leader.
- Mrs Nadine Schepers, Kliq Employability, career counsellor/senior coach.

## 5.3 Examples of good practice: ASV – Solvay Chemicals, Herten

### 5.3.1 Characteristics of the company

ASV is a joint venture of the Bureau Outplacement, which is the outplacement agency of the Public Employment Office (PES), and the temporary employment agencies Start and Vedor. Starting its activities in the beginning of the nineties as a commercial department within the PES, Bureau Outplacement has recently been integrated in Kliq. The Bureau Outplacement offers psychological guidance, practical training and support in job search and matching for redundant employees. The focus of attention is on the individual. Starting from the skills, experience and wishes of the candidate, the Bureau Outplacement offers both group activities and individual support in finding a suitable, permanent job. The Bureau Outplacement disposes of offices spread all over the coun-

try. The staff consists of generally certified and/or professionally trained career counsellors. The Bureau Outplacement aims to target all different groups of workers, but is in practice mainly involved in the guidance and matching of low to middle skilled employees. While the Bureau Outplacement is mainly responsible for outplacement support and training, Start and Vedor give input in the ASV joint venture by bringing in their networks, thereby facilitating access to the labour market for redundant employees by providing active matching and vacancy offers.

### 5.3.2 Overview of measures: components and scope

Solvay Chemicals is a large worldwide chemical group with headquarters in Belgium. The plant located in Herten, chosen as the present case study, was founded in 1936. Its core activity is the production of chlorine by means of mercuric electrolysis. Because of the policy of a number of European countries, starting in the eighties, to put mercury on a "black list" of chemicals, Solway was forced to end its production of chlorine in 1999. The company did not explore other means of production.

During the fall of 1998, following a joint venture with the German BASF, Solway announced the dismissal of 40 employees. Directly following the establishment of a social plan for this group, Solway announced the closure of the chloride plant, and, as a consequence, the dismissal of another 140 employees in 1999. Over 180 employees of a total of 230 were dismissed. The remaining part of the staff continued working in the alkaline evaporate installation and the catalyst plant that were left intact after the restructuring. Of the group that was made redundant in 1999, a total of 112 employees of 50 years and older received a suppletion arrangement that guaranteed a reasonable level of income until reaching retirement. The remaining group of 38 workers was offered outplacement for one year, with a possibility to extend this period to two years following advice of the supervision commission that was in charge of a fair execution of the social plan. This group of workers consisted of a mix of low- and middle-trained technical employees (mean age 40 years), who had a relatively high tenure within Solway. Wil Maenen, former Solway HR Director in Herten, explains that Solway used to be a company where several generations of employees spent their entire careers. Huub Mestrom, personnel officer at Solway in Herten, comments: "*Solvay had already been known as a plant that survived all storms. Therefore, the first reorganisation in 1993 had already come as a real shock to people.*"

Most of the redundant Solway employees were technical operators and production workers who disposed of certificates and in-company training. This employability clearly facilitated their transfer to other jobs. Furthermore, during their career at Solway, employees had performed rotating tasks with different machines that made them even more employable.

The main task for ASV was to support redundant employees in re-orientation and in finding another suitable, permanent job. Frits Geraets, former chairman of the works council, explains: "*The main goal of the outplacement programme was to guide people in their transfer to another job in such a way that they would still enjoy their new job after one year.*" Peter Minkenberg, career counsellor at the Bureau Outplacement, comments: "*Our main task was to guide people to finding a suitable job that they would enjoy. There is no use in forcing people into positions in which they run the risk of another negative experience. An enjoyable suitable new job can take away much of the pain of the dismissal.*"

Immediately following the announcement of dismissals, the HR department started active job search even before the negotiations about the social plan had been terminated. Hetty Kijzer, union leader at the Dutch Confederation of the Trade Union Congress (Federatie van Nederlandse Vakverenigingen, FNV Bondgenoten) for the process industry, states that the HR department has played a decisive role in supporting employees in finding new employment. The personal network of the HR director was deployed for job placement, regional companies were actively approached and employees were offered support in job search, basic application skills and administrative procedures. Once the social plan had been established, these activities were handed over to ASV. Maenen states that one of the reasons for people to put trust in support from the HR department was that this department was not only responsible for the execution of the reorganisation, but was at the same time its direct target.

The mobility centre that had been arranged for by the HR department was handed over to ASV. The outplacement programme that was offered included both, psychological guidance in the mourning process and in re-orientation on the one hand, and practical support in job search and matching on the other. The mobility centre also took over part of the administration of employees, such as their inscription with the PES and the Insurance Administration Office.

ASV took offices at the plant in Herten in order to enable employees to start searching for another job while still being employed by Solvay. In the mobility centre, search facilities and vacancies were being offered, and career counsellors of ASV were present to individually support employees on a weekly basis. Employees were offered the opportunity of performing job search activities during working hours. Minkenberg comments: *"The advantage of our presence at the plant site was that people could perform their search activities in their familiar surroundings."*

ASV started their programme by organising information sessions in which employees were informed about the content and possibilities of the outplacement programme. Geraets explains that these sessions were necessary to convince employees to participate in the programme: *"Initially people were primarily interested in the money, but in the course of the reorganisation their focus of interest shifted more and more towards receiving good guidance and support in finding another job."* The information sessions were followed by an intake that subsequently formed the basis for delineating individual outplacement programmes. The psychological guidance in mourning over the job loss proved to be an important aspect of the outplacement programme in the case of Solvay. Minkenberg: *"People felt grieved in their pride. They had always been working hard. We taught people how to deal with their job loss, both in group settings and in individual sessions. People can learn from each other and receive feedback from group members."* Geraets confirms that the group-orientated approach was important in supporting employees in the mourning process: *"People got the opportunity to talk to and support each other. I personally believe that it has been an enormous help for people to be able to ventilate their emotions at work and to receive support from colleagues."*

Another important aspect of the psychological guidance of employees proved to be their re-orientation. This aspect was addressed during the four-weeks group training and in additional individual talks with the counsellors. All employees could participate in the training on a voluntary basis. The training consisted of three main components: self-analysis, labour market analysis and practical training of application skills and job search. Geraets stresses the importance of self-analysis during the training. Minkenberg

explains how this self-analysis formed the basis for further steps in the outplacement programme: *"Clarifying to people who they are and what they want makes them self-confident, which in turn makes it easier for them to search for a job and present themselves to potential new employers. One could also detect that especially elderly workers showed fear with regard to the labour market."*

The outplacement support has proven to be important in making people shift their focus from past experiences to future possibilities. Minkenberg: *"When people have been working for the same company for a long time, they start to identify themselves with the company. The company has become part of their own identity. We need to support people in dissociating themselves from this company identity."* Geraets: *"People need to turn the button and make the best of their situation. The joint support of the outplacement agency, the HR-department and the works council, and the social support between workers has been helpful in that process."* Minkenberg: *"It is important that people don't look back in resentment, but can look at future possibilities. That takes a lot of personal attention and clarity."*

Apart from psychological guidance, employees were supported both during the group training and on an individual basis in application skills and job search as well as matching. ASV played an active role in stimulating the self-efficacy of candidates in their job search on the one hand, and in actively participating in acquisition and selection of vacancies on the other. Networks of Solvay, the PES, Start and Vedior have all been actively drawn on in order to find new jobs for the redundant Solvay employees. The job placement was facilitated by the favourable labour market and the regional shortage of process operators.

The intensive collaboration among the different parties involved in the reorganisation is propounded by all respondents as being partly the reason for the success of the outplacement activities. The PES, Start, Vedior, the HR department, the works council, and the labour unions successfully cooperated in finding solutions for the redundant employees. Minkenberg: *"The co-operation between the Bureau Outplacement and the HR-department was perfect. They [HR] were available at any time for deliberation and cooperated in a constructive manner to find good solutions for the employees."*

The Bureau Outplacement followed all candidates for two months after having found another job. Minkenberg explained that employees having difficulties in their new job could be reintegrated in the outplacement programme.

### 5.3.3 Evaluation

The outplacement programme has been very successful. Of the 38 participants in the programme, 35 found another job within one year. The most crucial factors for the success of the outplacement programme were:

- Employability of redundant employees related to training, certification and task-rotation during their career at Solvay;
- Tailored guidance in outplacement support;
- Combination of stimulating self-efficacy of the candidate on the one hand, and shared responsibility in job search and matching between the candidate and the agency on the other hand;
- Combination of psychological guidance in the mourning process and re-orientation, as well as practical support;

- Combination of group sessions for stimulating social support between candidates on the one hand, and individual support for enabling tailor made guidance on the other;
- Intensive, successful cooperation between Bureau Outplacement, HR department, Works Council, Public Employment Services (PES), Start and Vedor;
- Combination of networks of Solvay, PES and temporary employment agencies;
- Favourable labour market;
- Clarity on the finiteness of employment within Solvay.

One of the barriers that came up during the outplacement programme was the relatively elevated level of Solvay employees' salaries, which made it difficult for candidates to find a similar job with the same level of income in another company. The financial means offered to dismissed employees in the social plan were partly aimed at compensating for this possible decline in salary.

Another barrier mentioned by Minkenberg was that during most of the outplacement activities employees were still working at the Solvay plant. Therefore, participants did not always dispose of sufficient time to dedicate to job search activities, and were obstructed from disengaging themselves completely from the company and focus on future employment.

After the actual dismissal, employees were entitled to unemployment benefits. Under the 'New Deal' ("Sluitende Aanpak") policy, unemployed are offered a training programme, a subsidised job or a regular job within one year. Minkenberg explained that this policy sometimes intervenes with the guidance by the outplacement agency: *"There exist many isolated programmes that are not interrelated. This means, for example, that the Insurance Administration Office can oblige people who are already participating in an outplacement programme to take certain steps to find another job. This makes things very difficult and confusing for the person involved."*

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#### Interview partners

- Mr Wil Maenen, Solvay Chemicals, former HR director, currently plant manager at Herten.
- Mr Huub Mestrom, Solvay Chemicals, HR-personnel officer.
- Mr Frits Geraets, Solvay Chemicals, former chairman of the Works Council.
- Mrs Hetty Kijzer, Union leader at the Dutch Confederation of the Trade Union Congress (Federatie van Nederlandse Vakverenigingen, FNV Bondgenoten) for the process industry.
- Mr Peter Minkenberg, career counsellor at the Bureau Outplacement.

## **5.4 Examples of good practice: Randstad Mobiliteitsdiensten – Ericsson**

### *5.4.1 Characteristics of the company*

Randstad Mobility Services (Randstad Mobiliteitsdiensten, RM) are an independent business unit that is part of Randstad Holding. Randstad Holding is a worldwide service provider of flexworkers. RM is specialised in guiding employees in the transition between jobs.

RM has been developed as a separate business unit within Randstad Holding in response to demands by clients to not only provide flexworkers, but also through- and outflow of staff. The core activity of RM is group outplacement, although individual guidance and matching has received growing attention over the last two years. Knowledge of group dynamics is explicitly used as an instrument to support dismissed employees in finding new jobs. Furthermore, active job search and matching are integral parts of the RM services. Compared to other outplacement agencies, RM offers very pragmatic guidance to their candidates, putting greater emphasis on job search and matching and less on psychological and emotional guidance of employees (for example, regarding the mourning process after job loss). RM offers tailored guidance that fits candidates' individual profiles.

RM disposes of four offices staffed by approximately 70 permanently employed job counsellors. Furthermore, RM deploys a network of free-lance counsellors. Most of the counsellors have a background as an intermediary in a temporary employment agency. The counsellors are usually located at the domain of their clients.

### *5.4.2 Overview of measures: components and scope*

Ericsson is a worldwide supplier of telecommunications, providing everything from systems and applications to mobile phones and other communication tools. Starting off as a Swedish company in 1876, today Ericsson operates in more than 140 countries around the world. In The Netherlands, Ericsson includes two juridically distinct entities: a research and development organisation (ELN) and a sales organisation (ETM). Because of globalisation and the decline in the telecom market over the past four years, several large restructurings have taken place worldwide, implicating the redundancy of thousands of employees.

In The Netherlands, over 120 employees were dismissed in 1998 when the production department was closed down. In the social plan for this group of mainly low-skilled employees with extended years of tenure, based in a region with a relatively elevated unemployment rate, much emphasis was put on supporting dismissed workers in finding another job by offering outplacement activities. During the same year, Ericsson also dismissed a group of young, mainly academically trained employees. The social plan that was drawn up for this group only contained financial compensations. Rob Salman, Director Human Resources of ELN, explains: *"At that time, with the favourable labour market, it was very easy for high skilled employees in the Telecom branch to find another job. People were absolutely not interested in receiving outplacement."* These examples show that Ericsson strives for tailored solutions for specific groups of redundant employees.

The subject of the present case study is the most recent reorganisation that has started in July 2001, where some 160 employees were made redundant on a total popu-



lation of 2,500 at that time. This group consisted of mainly highly educated, young employees, with only one fourth being over 40 years old. The social plan that has been established consisted of both financial compensation and outplacement activities for employees over the age of 40. Employees were given the opportunity to participate in an outplacement programme of RM during their six-month period of notice on a voluntary basis.

Central to the outplacement activities offered was a differentiation in guidance for different age groups. In accordance with the social plan, three groups were defined for whom differentiated support was offered by RM:

- employees under age of 40 could make an appeal to a help desk and subscribe to relevant workshops;
- employees between 40 and 50 years of age were offered guidance and matching for a period of six months;
- employees over age 50 were offered guidance and matching for a period of one year.

Salman explains that, apart from budgetary reasons, Ericsson has opted for RM because of their group-orientated, pragmatic approach, in which active job search and matching receives dominant attention over psychological guidance in the mourning process and re-orientation. The affiliation with the target group and the possibility of modular training for the group of employees younger than 40 years were additional arguments for Ericsson to choose RM.

The programme started with an information session, the day after the notification of dismissal, in which all employees of over age 40 (40+) were informed about the approach and method of RM. Subsequently, intakes were held with all 40+ employees. Individual profiles were drawn up in order to establish a tailored programme for each candidate. Furthermore, a three-day mobility group session was organised in which candidates were trained in making a self-analysis, recent labour market developments, and application strategies and skills.

For the group that was younger than 40 years, a help desk was set up at the Ericsson domain, offering practical application support and advice in approaching the labour market. Furthermore, this group had the possibility to subscribe on a voluntary basis to a number of workshops regarding personal analysis, basic application techniques, networking and salary negotiations. Additionally, Ericsson organised a so-called "company day" during which twenty companies presented themselves. Salman explains that this day proved to be successful in motivating redundant employees to quickly turn their heads to future possibilities and employment, and in making the social responsibility and commitment of Ericsson visible to its employees.

For the employees over age 50 (50+), the programme started with group sessions and individual talks with a counsellor. Support and group training were offered to candidates in dealing with the job loss. Additionally, specific training programmes were organised for this group bearing themes such as self-employment, second half career guidance and communication skills.

The remaining part of the programme for the entire group of 40+ was divided into individual guidance and group activities. Candidates were individually assisted in drawing up an inventory of knowledge, competencies, and wishes, analysis of vacancies and application skills. The so-called "job clubs" aimed at exchanging experiences and

stimulating social support between candidates. During these job club meetings, participants were informed about themes such as networking, psychological tests and legal aspects.

This phase of drawing up personal profiles and labour market analysis usually took about three months. In the following step of active job search and matching, counsellors supported candidates in actively approaching potential employers. Candidates could draw on the networks of both Ericsson and Randstad, and deploy traditional job search methods such as newspapers and the Internet. Lilian in 't Zand, regional manager at RM, explains: *"We (RM) do not only train the candidate in developing application skills, but we also divide the 'homework'. Since we are very much focused on the labour market, we consider it to be our task to actively acquire vacancies and to approach the market. In this division of homework between the candidate, who also bears a proper responsibility, and RM, we clearly distinguish ourselves from more traditional outplacement agencies."* Additionally, optional instruments such as psychological tests, secondment, experimental and temporary employment and job specific training were offered to support the candidate in finding another job.

#### 5.4.3 Evaluation

Five months after the start of the programme, the final results cannot be evaluated yet. RM claims that the method deployed for Ericsson usually leads to 90% of the candidates finding another job within one year. The combination of mainly group-orientated, pragmatic support and training on the one hand, and co-sharing responsibility in active job search and matching by the candidate and the agency on the other, proves to be successful. In 't Zand explains that the personal motivation, discipline and action-readiness of the candidate, and clearness and stimulation on the side of the ex-employer are other crucial factors contributing to a successful outplacement. Carla Kiburg, union leader of the Dutch Confederation of the Trade Union Congress (Federatie van Nederlandse Vakverenigingen, FNV Bondgenoten), explains that quickly changing people's mindsets from mourning to future employment should be an important element of the outplacement programme: *"It is very important that outplacement counsellors support candidates in changing their focus from the trouble that lies behind them to future possibilities. If people remain in a mourning mindset over their job loss for too long, it will take much longer for them to get back to work."* The RM programme seems to be less suitable for candidates who are in need of extensive psychological guidance in their grieving process and re-orientation. The style of an agency and the content of the activities offered, which in this case is very pragmatic, should ideally match with the needs and background of the target group involved. Kiburg: *"Some outplacement agencies are suitable for blue collar workers, others more for white collar employees. It is important to know which methods, style and network they deploy. We keep records of which agency is suitable for certain types of jobs. The quality also varies with the region agencies operate in."* Obviously, one best method does not exist.

The differentiation in guidance by age group seems to have been successful for the specific target group of highly employable Ericsson employees in a favourable labour market. However, these possible effects cannot be generalised to other situations. Another element in the social plan is the differentiation in periods during which different age groups are entitled to outplacement support. Since the possibilities of finding another employment decline with age (a problem for elderly workers), this seems to be a

logical differentiation. All respondents agree that it is important to have finality in the period during which candidates are supported. Kiburg: *"In current negotiations, I try to negotiate outplacement support for six months with the possibility of extending this period if necessary. This way a safety net is created while simultaneously taking into account the need of finiteness in terms of costs for the employer."*

One of the structural barriers that has come up in the Ericsson case is that the Unemployment Insurance Act obliges (future) unemployed to actively deploy all opportunities to find another job. This implies that a dismissed employee is legally more or less forced to accept outplacement activities when offered by the ex-employer, although voluntary participation is of utmost importance for success. A possible sanction of not accepting outplacement support is the capping on future unemployment benefits. Kiburg explains that an obligatory participation in an outplacement programme in previous Ericsson restructurings had been negatively evaluated by the agency involved.

A final aspect is the importance of separating temping activities from outplacement activities. Kiburg: *"It is very important that within an employment agency, outplacement and temping activities are organised under two clearly distinct business units that should be staffed by different people. The outplacement organisation can profit from the use of the network of the temporary employment agency, but it should be very clear for the candidate that he or she is not inscribed in a temporary employment agency, but is being guided by an outplacement agency that uses the facilities of the temporary employment agency."* In 't Zand comments on this aspect: *"In our information sessions we clearly explain that we represent a separate business unit within Randstad, and that we focus on permanent jobs. Our advantage is that we represent the labour market, which is very important to many people."*

#### Sources

- Ericsson, Sociaal Plan Ericsson Nederland [Social Plan Ericsson The Netherlands], 25 June 2001.
- Randstad Mobiliteitsdiensten (June 2001). Concept projectvoorstel voor Ericsson door Randstad Mobiliteitsdiensten [Concept project proposal for Ericsson by Randstad Mobiliteitsdiensten]. Den Bosch: unpublished.

#### Interview partners

- Mr Rob Salman, Ericsson EuroLab Netherlands B.V., Director Human Resources.
- Mr Cor Timmermans, Ericsson, member of the Works Council.
- Mr Hank van 't Wout, Ericsson, chairman of the Works Council.
- Mrs Carla Kiburg, union leader of Dutch Confederation of the Trade Union Congress (Federatie van Nederlandse Vakverenigingen, FNV Bondgenoten).
- Mrs Lilian in 't Zand, Randstad Mobiliteitsdiensten, regional manager.
- Mr Peter Minkenberg, career counsellor at the Bureau Outplacement.

### **5.5 Conclusion as to what is “good practice”**

Outplacement agencies generally offer similar basic elements in their services. A general introduction and intake, establishment of a personal profile, psychological guidance in the mourning process and in self analysis, support in labour market analysis, training in application skills, and support in job search and matching, and follow-up care are basic activities that are integrated in the case studies described here. The agencies put different accents in terms of group vs. individual support, stimulating self-efficacy vs. active support in job search and matching, and psychological guidance vs. pragmatic support.

Integrating group elements in the outplacement programme can have a positive effect both in terms of task-orientated and emotional support among candidates and in terms of reducing the costs for the employer. Individual elements meet the need for tailored guidance and for considering specific needs and wishes of the candidate. The right balance between group and individual elements depends on the profile of the target group involved on the one hand and on the budgetary possibilities on the other.

In a similar way, it is important to find the right balance between psychological and practical support. Need for psychological guidance in the mourning process and in supporting candidates to disassociate themselves from the former employer and focus on future possibilities depend on the background of the individuals involved. For a young, highly employable academic job hopper, the need for this type of psychological support is rather different from that of a low-skilled production worker who has been working in the same factory for thirty years. This holds the same for the need of practical support in training application skills and approaching the labour market. The need for psychological support in re-orientation depends both on the individual needs and wishes, and on the demands in the labour market. If there exists no more need for the type of skills that individuals have deployed during their careers, psychological guidance is needed in supporting the candidate to re-orientate on other possible jobs.

As for the right balance between stimulating self-efficacy and taking over job-hunting activities, once again the profile and background of the individual is decisive. In The Netherlands, the outplacement agencies that are part of temping organisations tend to put more emphasis on job hunting than traditional outplacement companies, that generally put the emphasis on psychological guidance and on stimulating self-efficacy. The case studies show that a co-shared responsibility in job search and matching between the candidate and the agency seems to be effective in many cases. Therefore, it is important that the specific network of the agency matches with the profile of the population involved.

• There is no one best formula for supporting redundant employees in their transfer to another job. It is important that the style of the counsellors, the network of the agency and the methods deployed match with the specific profiles and needs of the target group involved. Furthermore, tailored guidance that matches the specific needs and profile of the individual candidate, in terms of psychological support, practical aid, and training is crucial for the success of the outplacement programme. In some cases, such as the example of the highly employable Ericsson employees, support can be restricted to thematic workshops. The favourable labour market has risen the question whether outplacement support should only be offered to vulnerable groups, such as low skilled, elderly workers. Apparently, not all dismissed employees need outplacement support

for finding another suitable job. However, outplacement could be integrated as a standard in the social plan as a safety net that employees can use on a voluntary basis.

The profiles of advisors involved in outplacement activities vary from professionally trained, certified career-counsellors to former HR- and temporary employment agency professionals, or advisors with technical backgrounds that match with specific skills and profiles of the population involved. Several case studies show a successful combination of all three types of counsellors. The integration of a representative of the (former) employer who is familiar with the specific company culture and can solve practical internal problems proves to be successful in some cases. The available budget, historical relations (e.g. in providing flex workers), method of approach and style of the counsellors involved are the most decisive elements in the choice of an agency. Involving labour unions and the works council in this choice can be important for their role in convincing dismissed workers to participate and put confidence in outplacement support.

The case studies show that an intensive collaboration among different parties involved in the outplacement process can have a synergetic effect on successful job placement. Joining the forces of outplacement counsellor, (former) employer, governmental authorities such as the Insurance Administration Office and the Public Employment Services can lead to an enlargement of labour market possibilities by combining different networks and overcoming legal barriers. Involving the former employer (or company site) in the outplacement process can be a way to show social responsibility towards employees. Active supervision and support of outplacement activities is in some cases organised under the supervision of a special steering committee. In other cases, the HR-department is made responsible for these tasks. Another element that improves the chances of a successful outplacement programme is the role of the employer preceding the dismissals. The most crucial aspect that needs to be underlined is employability. Regular broad-based and technical training, certification and task-rotation clearly improve the chances of an outplacement candidate of finding another job. Furthermore, a fair, human execution of the reorganisation can support redundant employees in making a positive start in the outplacement process. Finally, an important aspect for the (former) employer is to provide clarity about the terms and date of dismissal. Ambiguity obstructs outplacement candidates from shifting their focus to future possibilities with other employers.

An active involvement of the (former) employer can be realised by establishing a steering committee consisting of representatives of the employer, the employees and the unions to supervise and support the progress of the outplacement process. Another instrument is integrating incentives in the social plan that make it financially rewarding for the company to support candidates in a quick transfer to other jobs. This does, however, bring about the risk of pressure, leaving the candidate insufficient possibilities to deal with mourning and re-orientation.

In the case studies, several barriers become apparent that can impede on a successful execution of outplacement programmes. Outplacement candidates receiving unemployment benefits are faced with obligations deriving from the Unemployment Insurance Act that can be conflicting with elements in the outplacement programme. An example is the obligation to frequently apply for jobs while candidates may be in the middle of a mourning process or re-orientation. Furthermore, under the so-called "New Deal"-policy, unemployed are offered obligatory guidance and training that can be

conflicting with the methods and guidance of the outplacement agency. A possible barrier on the side of the employees involved is the lack of motivation to participate in outplacement activities. All respondents stress personal motivation of candidates as one of the most crucial factors for a successful outplacement programme. Participation in such programmes should therefore preferably be on a voluntary basis. Obliging employees to participate severely reduces the chances of success. Extensive information sessions and the role of labour unions and the works council are important in convincing employees to put their trust in outplacement support. The lack of motivation can be provoked by ambiguity about the dismissal date and about possible internal replacement. Another reason for candidates not to be motivated is the so-called 'golden cage'. The continuation of pay for a certain period, or a financially rewarding suppletion arrangement can be more attractive than the salary offered by a potential new employer.

## **6 General discussion**

In the course of this part of the SOCOSE project, a total of 52 employees have been interviewed. A group of 25 workers in insecure job positions were asked what organisational elements helped and obstructed them, in adequately coping with their insecurity. Another group of 27 former outplacement candidates were questioned about their former employer and about their experiences with the outplacement support in overcoming the dismissal shock and in successfully finding another job. Finally, seven Dutch companies were selected for the description of innovative case studies of which four are reported here. Several parties involved (e.g. labour unions, HR managers, general managers and outplacement counsellors) were asked which elements could set examples for other companies that want to deal with reorganisations and dismissals in a human and fair manner.

The Netherlands have known a relatively long and successful history in outplacement counselling. Moreover, collective bargaining generally does not only include curative measures such as outplacement, but also provides for preventive measures such as training and job rotation that further the employability of workers and facilitate their transfer to other jobs in case of dismissal. This general tendency of focusing on life-time employability also becomes apparent in the interviews with respondents who have or had to deal with job insecurity and (potential) dismissal. Our study shows that both employees and companies appreciate outplacement as being an important measure in supporting individuals in their transfer to another job. However, they also stress that outplacement should rather be part of an integrative set of instruments aimed at furthering the employability of individuals. Regular broad-based and technical training, certification, career management, personal development plans and task-rotation clearly improve the chances of an outplacement candidate to find another job. An ideal organisational setting with a well-developed employability-policy should even make the use of outplacement as a curative instrument unnecessary. Our study shows that employable workers were generally well equipped to adequately cope with job insecurity and occupational transitions.

Employability is usually defined in terms of objective features such as level of education, skills, working experience and age. However, our study has clearly shown that "softer" features such as self-efficacy and personal well-being are extremely impor-

tant in determining the individual level of employability. Employees who feel confident about their own capacities and skills and about their abilities to find another job, have fewer problems in dealing with job transfers than workers who are less self-confident. This specific aspect of employability is positively related to the evaluation of fair and human treatment by the employer. Individuals who feel having been treated in a fair manner by their former employer need less time to cope with mourning over the past, and are able to focus more easily and with more self-confidence on future job-perspectives. Thus, a fair and human treatment in the context of reorganisations and dismissals can be an important way for companies to further the employability of their redundant employees.

The results of the case studies have raised the question whether outplacement support is necessary for everybody, or should rather be restricted to vulnerable groups such as low-skilled, elderly workers. The best way to deal with this question is to integrate outplacement as a standard in collective agreements or social plans, as a kind of safety net that workers can use on a voluntary basis. Also, the necessary period of outplacement greatly varies in the judgements of employees. The support should provide workers with sufficient support and security after their dismissal, but should not have a negative effect on the motivation for job-search (i.e. the golden cage). The periods recommended varied between six months and two years (for vulnerable groups).

Furthermore, the results of our study show the differences in need of support and type of support when comparing various individuals and groups of workers. Some (groups of) employees benefit most from practical training of basic application skills, while for others support in psychological stabilisation and furthering of self-efficacy prove to be effective. The Dutch outplacement market provides a wide variety of agencies that put different emphasis in their services in terms of psychological vs. pragmatic support, active support in job search vs. stimulating self-efficacy, and group vs. individual support. There is no one best way or magic formula for the effectiveness of outplacement support. The network of the agency, the methods deployed and the style of the counsellors should best match the specific profile and needs of the individuals involved. Therefore, tailored guidance is a crucial prerequisite for the success of outplacement.

Our study points out the vulnerability of specific groups of workers in the current dynamic labour market. Elderly workers with extended years of tenure generally feel less secure about their position on the labour market than their younger job-hopping colleagues. More specifically, the group of workers between 45 and 55, who generally do not benefit from favourable arrangements for elderly workers but have reduced chances of finding another job, proves to be particularly vulnerable in the context of reorganisations.

The results of our empirical study show that Dutch companies generally dispose of an extended set of measures to support their workers in both furthering their employability (e.g. training, internal mobility etc.) and in helping them during job transitions (e.g. material compensations, outplacement etc.). However, a less visible and tangible element of support, that is communication, clearly needs more attention. Thus, although the formal, legal and material parts of reorganisations seem to be relatively well developed in The Netherlands, the aspect of human, fair and open communication still needs a lot of improvement. Open, honest, clear, timely and personal information prove to be crucial for both reducing the stress of job insecurity and dismissal, and for focusing

more easily on future perspectives. Fair and human communication provokes less frustration and anger at the beginning of the outplacement programme, and thereby has an important effect on the duration of the support needed.

A good and intensive collaboration among different parties involved (outplacement counsellor, employer, governmental authorities, and public employment services) can have a synergetic effect on successful job placement. Joining the forces of these parties can result in an enlargement of labour market chances and in overcoming legal barriers. An active involvement by the (former) employer in the outplacement process can be a way of showing social responsibility towards employees. Finally, an important aspect for the (former) employer is to provide clarity about the terms and date of dismissal. Ambiguity obstructs outplacement candidates from shifting their focus to future possibilities with other employers.