

My work and me

Career coaches urge new approaches to improve work-life balance



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The idea of “workable work” has become a key concept in the ongoing conversation around keeping people in the workforce longer, which is essential as both life expectancies and retirement ages have increased. But merely making jobs less stressful or exhausting isn’t the solution, say two Flemish jobs coaches.

“We have to match flexibility with durability,” says Anita Stevens. Based in Haacht, Flemish Brabant, Stevens isn’t crazy about the term “workable work”. “Every job should be workable in itself,” she says. “We should instead focus on ‘work appetite’ – people should really want to do their job instead of sitting at home.”

Stevens’ clients often come to her with “career cheques” – cheques handed out by the government of Flanders to encourage people to seek coaching. She works with people from all sectors between the ages of 18 and 65. “The only group that’s underrepresented in my practice is the unskilled workforce,” she says.

In some sessions, Stevens tries to help her clients discover what they really want in their professional lives. In many cases, the answer is a better balance between work and downtime. “The problem in our labour market currently is that people who admit this during their job interview – that they want to take a step back – often get negative reactions,” Stevens says. “Companies sometimes think that these people just want to take things easy. That’s totally different from a career that enables you to have a more balanced life.”

Stevens also works as an outplacement coach when companies lay off large numbers of workers. Often, there are many employees 55 and older in the group. “It’s not easy to find a new job that suits them,” she says.

To help address the problem, in 2013, Stevens published the book *Devintage werknemer (The Vintage Worker)*, in which she discusses the many strengths of older workers. They are wrinkled by experience, she says, but still ready for a second career – a bit like vintage furniture that perfectly fits into a stylish modern interior.

Silvia Derom, an independent career coach based in Aalst, instead likes to talk about ‘creative generalists’. “Our society has always fostered the ideal of the specialist,” she says, “an employee that’s very good at one particular skill – in a narrow field that no longer holds any secrets. The problem with the specialist is that when they lose their jobs –



Silvia Derom, who says that “creative generalists” are able to evolve with the rapidly changing job market

or eventually get bored with them – they struggle to find new ones.” Creative generalists are exactly the opposite: with very broad interests, they need a lot of variation in their professional lives. From the moment they have mastered a particular skill, they are looking for the next challenge. But doesn’t that sound awfully

they really dive deep into it. But that doesn’t mean they’ll stick with it for years.”

What about training? Just a decade ago, additional training and re-education was regarded as the sole responsibility of workers. They had to ensure they remained up to speed on advances in their field and changing technologies.

Maybe employees had best keep their feet on the ground, then, and not put all their eggs in one basket? “There’s no harm in having a plan B up your sleeve,” Stevens says. “Even if you think you are in a sector that will never be hit by big redundancies.”

She gives the example of ICT experts who specialised in mainframe computing in the 1990s and were able to earn a lot of money in that era. “But these days, ICT companies aren’t interested in that anymore, so these people can’t find a job – unless they got themselves re-educated in time,” she explains. “What lesson should we remember from this? That you should always be aware of your own expiry date.”

That’s why Stevens is calling on lawmakers to work out a purposeful policy that promotes flexible careers attuned to the changing needs of employees. “In the Netherlands, for example, fire fighters who lose their jobs are redirected to jobs in the insurance industry because of their skills in determining damages. In Belgium and Flanders, there are still too many legal and administrative hurdles.” Stevens for instance once had a client in her practice who had a co-parenting arrangement with his ex-partner. So he asked his employer if he could work 30 hours in the weeks he looked after his children and 50 hours in the weeks they were with their mother. “His request turned out to be out of the question,” she says. “That’s really unfortunate.”

“Our society has always fostered the ideal of the ‘specialist’, but they struggle to find new jobs

like a job hopper? “It’s indeed tempting to call creative generalists job hoppers,” Derom admits. “But these people are in fact much more able to ‘recycle’ themselves on the labour market. And in today’s rapidly evolving labour market, that’s certainly a strength.”

In fact, there are also creative generalists who could actually be called specialists. According to Derom, generalists come in different sizes and shapes. “Some like to work on multiple projects at the same time; some focus on one project after another – I call the latter ‘serial generalists,’” she explains. “When these serial generalists focus on one project,

This was also when the concept of lifelong learning first emerged. Now, however, this responsibility has come to rest on the shoulders of employers. “From the end of the 1990s, companies started to heavily invest in personnel training,” Stevens says. But she is quick to point out that these efforts completely collapsed with the economic crisis in recent years. “In 2009, only 6% of Belgian employees between the ages of 45 and 54 received extra training from their company,” she says. “That’s really low compared to other European countries. In Sweden, for example, more than 20% of employees in this age group received extra education.”

WEEK IN INNOVATION

Ghent researchers brew beer with wastewater

Researchers from the bio-engineering sciences faculty at Ghent University have brewed a beer with purified wastewater. They carried out the experiment for a global congress on the recycling of resources from water flows. The researchers used wastewater from De Wilde brewery in Ghent. “We purified it using membranes, a technique applied to remove the salt from seawater,” explained Professor Ingmar Nopens. “This technique is used in areas with a shortage of drinking water.” The researchers say many techniques for the recycling of resources are already available, and they want to test consumer response.

Teenager’s website unites neighbours

Thibaud Deurwaerder from Deurle, a district of Sint-Martens-Latem in East Flanders, has created a social network site to improve contact between neighbours in Flanders. The 16-year-old got the idea for *burenonline.com* at the beginning of the summer holidays, when his friends all went on holiday. “I heard other young people playing in the neighbourhood,” he said. “I wanted to make contact but didn’t know how to get in touch with my neighbours without bothering them.” On *burenonline.com*, users can connect with people living locally. To make sure people live at the address they submit when registering online, verification codes are sent by post.

Vlario predicts more flooding and drought

Climate change research shows that summer storms will become more extreme, but there will be much fewer small rain showers. The total amount of rainfall in summer will decrease. As a result, climate change will cause two water management problems: an increased chance of drought and low-water problems on the one hand, and on the other hand more flooding – especially sewer flooding. The findings were reported by Vlario, the knowledge centre and discussion platform for the sewer and waste water purification sector in Flanders. The conclusions are based on a study by professor Patrick Willems of the University of Leuven on urbanisation and climate change.

\ Andy Furniere