

From Taylorism to teams: organisational and institutional experimentation at France Télécom

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Summary

In this article we examine work reorganisation in technician units at France Télécom (FT/Orange) following the social crisis associated with employee suicides in 2007–2009. As a result of trade union campaigns and changes in leadership, the company moved to a more collaborative model, relying on broadened skills and enhanced worker participation in decision-making. Drawing on the framework of organisational and institutional experimentation, we argue that the crisis provided an opportunity to shift from top-down, Taylorised practices to a high-involvement model based on multi-skilled teams. This new model fostered mutual gains for workers in terms of increased autonomy and broadened skills, and for the employer through improved efficiency and customer service. It was underpinned, however, by the strengthening of labour's countervailing power following the social crisis, which encouraged and supported managers in prioritising psychosocial health as a key organisational objective.

Keywords

Trade unions, France, telecommunications, psychosocial health, social partnership, work design, teams

Introduction

After several decades of both labour market liberalisation and growing inequality, workers are seeking better working conditions that foster 'productive, innovative, healthy and inclusive' environments (Ferrerias et al., 2020). Work-related psychosocial stressors, including low job control, high job demands and job insecurity or precarity, have been found to be increasing in many countries, driving up rates of burnout and illness (Pfeffer, 2018). But while laws and collective agreements often provide well-developed formal mechanisms to mitigate physical health and

safety risks, the regulation of psychosocial stressors is a newer and more experimental area in public policy and industrial relations.

Given the organisation- and workplace-specific nature of many psychosocial stressors, trade unions and other worker representatives are often best placed to identify and help address these threats to their members' health and well-being. This can occur via formal bargaining and joint committees to encourage healthy policies, or via mobilisation and strikes to overturn abusive ones (Akhtar and Moore, 2016; Goh et al., 2015; O'Brady and Doellgast, 2021; Thanem and Elraz, 2022).

An important question is how unions and other worker representatives can best use these forms of collective voice to advance workers' interests in this area.

In this article, we examine the case of France Télécom/Orange (FT/Orange), where worker voice was initially weak, but was then strengthened following a 'social crisis' resulting from a wave of employee suicides in 2007–2009 (Doellgast et al., 2021). These suicides were widely attributed to restructuring practices based on centralised control; a narrow, Taylorised division of labour; and systematic pressure on employees to relocate or quit their jobs. In the wake of the social crisis, new workplace- and national-level institutions were established that supported collective worker voice in management practices. Through a case study of a work reorganisation initiative in FT/Orange's technician units, we show that these institutions helped to create the conditions for management to adopt a new model of work organisation that reversed many of the psychosocial health-destroying aspects of the previous model, through investing in broadened job classifications, multi-skilled teams, and enhanced local control over performance standards.

The work reorganisation initiative in FT/Orange's technician units represents an unusual case, in which, in a short period of time, an organisation shifted successfully from a strongly Taylorised, low-involvement model of work organisation toward a high-involvement, team-based model. We draw on the framework of organisational and institutional experimentation, as a theory of 'co-constitution of institutions and actors' (Kristensen and Morgan, 2012: 415), to analyse the factors that contributed to a successful partnership between unions and employers to implement this new model, in the context of a shifting balance of power in the organisation and workplace.

The article is organised as follows. We first review past research on organisational and institutional experimentation and outline our argument within this framework. We then present the background to our case study and summarise our research methods. Third, we describe changes in work organisation at FT/Orange's technician units over the period leading up to the social crisis in 2009–2010. Fourth, we examine the social accords and work reorganisation initiatives in the technician units. We conclude with a discussion of the opportunities for, and constraints on, organisational and institutional experimentation aimed at improving worker autonomy and control.

Literature review

Murray et al. (2020: 135–137) describe the organisational and institutional experimentation framework as an alternative approach to analysing how actors develop new strategies, based on changing capabilities and resources, to engage with disruptions in the world of work. They distinguish between *organisational experimentation*, in which actors 'seek to modify or renew their organisations, networks and alliances', and *institutional experimentation*, which involves the scaling-up and institutionalisation of these responses over time.

Employment relations have long been fertile terrain for both kinds of experimentation, as unions and workers react to employer-driven restructuring at the organisational and workplace levels, variously enabled or constrained by a shifting landscape of labour market and industrial relations

institutions (Benassi and Kornelakis, 2021; Ferreras et al., 2020). For example, case studies by Connolly (2020) and by Pulignano et al. (2020) examine unions' response to radical restructuring plans and dramatic changes in the organisation of work to cut costs and increase competitiveness. In these contexts, they found that unions do not limit their experimentation to finding new ways of organising, but also try to institutionalise 'new understandings, norms and rules' (Murray et al., 2020) to extend successful experimentation outside their organisation. Kristensen and Morgan (2012: 413) describe a process that can create 'new dynamic complementarities among employees, managers, institutions, and markets', highlighting the importance of experimentation as a premise for the development of new institutions and values within employment systems.

It is important to examine cases of experimentation in employment relations not only as part of an ongoing process of sense-making, but as an interaction between actors with different power resources. Even where unions and employers engage in social partnerships, these are based on 'formally structured, ongoing relations of cooperation' (Fichter and Greer, 2004: 71). As power dynamics can change over time, the success of a social partnership depends on its evolution and construction (Martínez Lucio and Stuart, 2004), and on its institutionalisation in the employment relations system (Fichter and Greer, 2004).

These partnerships can also be built through conflict and union renewal strategies (Haynes and Allen, 2001), based on a bottom-up approach through which workers adapt social-movement and organising techniques to promote 'workplace, social, and political change' (Turner, 2005: 200). The literature on organisational and institutional experimentation highlights the fresh and tentative nature of strategies coming from the bottom of organisations, as members use their local and specific knowledge to find solutions to new and volatile problems (Dorf and Sabel, 1998). At the same time, where unions experiment with partnership in the context of a strong structural or institutional power imbalance in favour of the employer, they are unlikely to advance worker interests significantly, as they often must give up their capacity to use or build associational power via strikes or conflict (Carver and Doellgast, 2021).

A key question raised in this literature is the relationship between, on the one hand, the creative and experimental process of co-designing new organisational practices based on 'new understandings' and 'meanings', and, on the other hand, the often conflicting interests and power resources that define the institutionally embedded employment relationship. Work reorganisation initiatives aimed at addressing psychosocial stress are an ideal place to study the intersection between these different factors, for two reasons. First, the high-involvement management practices most associated with reduced stressors – for example, those that significantly increase workers' job autonomy and control – hold strong potential for advancing mutual gains (Guest, 2017; Lee et al., 2015). Second, such practices typically require strong collective worker voice, underpinned by countervailing worker power, to actually achieve those more balanced worker–employer benefits (Boxall and Winterton, 2018; Doellgast et al., 2009; Pohler and Luchak, 2014).

Most studies on the role of collective worker voice in high-involvement management rely on cross-sectional comparisons of organisations or workplaces with different collective bargaining institutions (for example, Pohler and Luchak, 2014) and union capabilities (for example, Frost, 2000), or located in distinct national institutional environments (for example, Kirchner and Hauff, 2019). This research has produced rich insights into the importance of worker voice for encouraging more psychosocially healthy approaches to work organisation. It has also described the role of strong labour market and collective bargaining institutions in establishing 'beneficial constraints' (Streeck, 1997) on employers that induce them to adopt and sustain high-road practices (Gallie, 2003). But these cross-sectional research designs are less well-suited for analysing the often dynamic and interdependent relationship between shifting management strategy and worker power, as it evolves over time within organisations and workplaces.

In this article, we examine the case of France Télécom/Orange's technician units, in which organisational experimentation around work organisation took place, but in the context of a temporal shift in power that favoured unions. Moreover, the conflict that led to this abrupt power shift centred on workers' psychosocial health and involved a process through which both the internal workforce and the public came to view a more participatory and worker-centred approach to management as a critical goal. The result was to legitimise radical change within the organisation and among managers, toward strengthened concerns with workers' well-being, both as an end in itself and as a factor contributing to enhanced organisational performance (Doellgast et al., 2021). Our analysis examines the motivation for and short-term outcomes from this experiment in work reorganisation in the context of a radical change in management objectives and collective worker voice.

Case study: France Télécom/Orange

Background

In France, collective bargaining is institutionalised and historically unions have been able to mobilise workers effectively (Beroud et al., 2008). But in the late 1990s and early 2000s, French employment relations underwent a progressive change, as neoliberal policies and Anglophone corporate practices led to 'a degree of managerial unilateralism unparalleled in any of the other continental European economies' (Goyer and Hancké, 2005: 174). Eurofound (2007) lamented a widespread deterioration of working conditions, focusing particularly on the escalation of psychological pressure and stress. A report from the French Ministry of Labour cites evidence that the average increase in psychological demands for all workers and the parallel decrease in job control were key factors contributing to increased psychosocial risks at work (Ministère du travail de l'emploi et de la santé, 2012).

In response to the growing crisis, French unions increased their willingness to negotiate at both local and national level, with a growing dependence on cooperating with employers (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2012). At the same time, in line with a general process of decentralisation of collective bargaining in Europe (Leonardi and Pedersini, 2018; Rehfeldt, 2009), company-level agreements have become increasingly prevalent. One focus of such agreements has been to regulate management practices associated with elevated risks to workers' well-being. Béthoux et al. (2015) show that attention to social dialogue on psychosocial risks started to grow in the first decade of the 2000s, after the most intense phase of restructuring and social crises.

Our analysis focuses on a case study of a French firm that shifted in a short period from a unilateral and top-down approach to management, characterised by significant psychosocial risks, to a more collaborative model that relied on 'conflict partnership' with its unions and workplace representatives. France Télécom (rebranded as 'Orange' in 2013 – hereafter FT/Orange) is France's incumbent, formerly state-owned telecommunications firm. At the time of our research, the French government held around 27 per cent of FT/Orange shares, and the company employed close to 90,000 people in France. Historically, a majority of these employees were civil servants, with working conditions set through civil service negotiations. In 2019 these civil servants still made up 40 per cent of the workforce.

In 2004, when state ownership of the company dropped below 50 per cent, the private sector system of workplace representation was adopted, including 22 works councils, workforce and union delegates, and around 300 local health and safety councils. By the late 2010s, the unions CGT and CFDT, together with the radical SUD, had the highest membership at France Télécom,

followed by FO and CFE-CGC. CFTC and UNSA also had members, but employee support was too low for formal representation rights. Elections for worker representatives were an important measure of support for each union, and the most successful were CGT, SUD and CFDT (in that order).

In 2006, in response to significant financial problems at the company, FT/Orange's CEO announced the three-year 'NExT' (Nouvelle Experience des Télécommunications) restructuring plan, with a goal of 22,000 redundancies and 14,000 job changes. It included a policy called 'Time to Move', which required employees to change their job every three years, often combined with mandatory relocation. Over the next few years, the unions jointly organised several initiatives to study and publicise problems of stress in the workplace. SUD and CFE-CGC organised an 'Observatory for Stress and Harassment at Work' that studied the impact of restructuring on the workforce, and SUD and the CGT organised a theatre project that dramatised the connections between management policies and burnout in front of large groups of employees and worker representatives.

In 2008–2009, France Télécom experienced a 'social crisis' in which a wave of over 30 employee suicides came to be attributed to these restructuring policies. In a previous article, we argued that strong public attention to these suicides could be traced to the unions' successful, collaborative strategies, first to construct an internal narrative among the workforce attributing worker stress and burnout to management-driven restructuring, and then to communicate this narrative to the media through research findings and worker mobilisation (Doellgast et al., 2021). As a result of this successful campaign, the French government pressured the deputy CEO to resign, and a new manager was appointed who was seen as more friendly to workers' demands (Du Roy, 2009). In this context, both new and existing managers who had been critical of the NExT plan opened up negotiations on a series of social accords. These included agreements that mobility should be voluntary; a commitment to survey employees every two or three years on stress, with committees established to prevent stress at the group and subsidiary level; consolidation of employee committees with new coordination structures; an agreement on work organisation with provisions for improving policies around breaks and holidays; and an agreement on work-life balance.

At the same time, the union SUD filed a formal complaint to the Paris prosecutor's office concerning the company's abusive practices, which FT/Orange's other unions eventually joined. The office opened an inquiry in 2010 that concluded in 2016, with the Paris prosecutor recommending that former FT/Orange executives be put on trial for 'workplace harassment'. The trial took place over the summer of 2019, leading to further press coverage and public debate. In December 2019, a criminal court found FT/Orange and its top managers guilty of 'moral harassment' connected to 35 suicides. The former management team, including the former CEO, faced imprisonment and fines, while the company was ordered to pay the victims €3m in damages. This was a landmark decision, which was seen to have significant potential repercussions, holding managers legally responsible for their workers' well-being. In addition, the France Télécom case was important in encouraging strengthened regulation requiring employers to monitor psychosocial risks, including a national collective agreement on harassment and violence at work (Palpacuer and Seignour, 2020).

Thus, the broad outlines of the FT/Orange case show an interesting shift from union exclusion to institutionalisation of social dialogue over psychosocial risks both within the firm and at the national level in France. In the following sections, we examine a case of work reorganisation that occurred in the wake of the social crisis and subsequent social accords.

Methodology

Our research findings are drawn from three studies, conducted at different times.

The first study was a 10-country analysis of organisational and work restructuring in incumbent telecommunications firms. The FT/Orange findings were based on 30 interviews (12 managers and 18 worker representatives), conducted by Doellgast (2022) between 2010 and 2012. Interviews from this study focused primarily on the details of labour relations and work organisation prior to the social crisis, as well as the social accord negotiations and work reorganisation initiatives that occurred in the wake of the social crisis.

The bulk of the empirical findings reported in this article are drawn from the second and third studies, which focused on the experience of field technicians before and after the experimentation with work reorganisation detailed below. In 2010–2011, Bellego (2013, 2021) carried out 54 interviews in three technician units (33 technicians, 21 managers). These units were selected to represent different contextual conditions across regions, including workforce demographics and population density (see Bellego, 2013 for details). In 2013, Bellego carried out 12 interviews (four technicians, four managers and four unionists) and two focus groups (with four additional technicians) in one unit that had implemented multi-skilled teams, to evaluate associated challenges and outcomes. The technician interviews and focus groups across these studies included similar representation from the three major specialisations affected by work reorganisation.

In 2016–2017 we carried out follow-up interviews with two union officials and an FT/Orange departmental manager who had been interviewed previously in the above studies, as well as one field technician identified through personal contacts, to update information on the progress of work reorganisation and the union's role.

In total, 100 interviews were conducted. These are not intended to constitute a representative sample. But our design does have the advantage of allowing us to confirm the basic 'facts' of the case (concerning the problems experienced prior to the social crisis, the reasons for the changes adopted, and at least their short-term impacts) through a large number of interviews with different stakeholders, carried out before, during and after a major work reorganisation initiative. Across the studies, most interviews were recorded and transcribed, with a small number summarised based on detailed notes. Interview transcripts were coded and organised by theme in summary reports produced for each project. These reports were then analysed jointly by the authors to produce the findings and argument of this article.

Work organisation in the technician units leading to the social crisis

Restructuring across FT/Orange in the period leading up to and during implementation of the NExT plan was accompanied by a progressive tightening of management control over the technicians in the 'Response Unit' (*Unité Intervention*, UI), the main technician services business unit at FT/Orange. This took two forms: increased specialisation and intensified individual control.

First, work in the Response Unit had been reorganised over time, from teams of multi-skilled technicians into a series of more narrowly specialised teams. By 2008 there were 28 regional response units throughout France with a total of 28,000 technicians. All of these units, comprising from 500 to 2000 employees each, included technicians with four main specialisations: *répartiteurs* (dispatch technicians, responsible for assigning jobs); *boucle locale* (network technicians, working on the network outside customers' homes); *intervention client* (consumer technicians, installing telephone and internet services at customers' homes); and *entreprise* (business technicians, carrying out installation work in large companies). Dispatch technicians

worked in Response Unit offices and had well defined responsibilities. But the work of the other three groups overlapped: for example, network technicians were responsible for building and maintaining the network for both consumer and business customers. Each specialisation of these three groups was managed in the same way in all response units in France, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Technicians in the three specialisations received their work order from a team called Workload Plan, depending on the nature of the problem. Once the order was assigned, however, if the problem was not actually a good fit, technicians in that specialisation could not directly reassign the job. Instead, the technicians would indicate ‘work not done’, and the Workload Plan team would reallocate the job to technicians in another specialisation. This could happen several times before finding the right technician, increasing the total time for completing an order. The consumer technicians sometimes had to explain to customers that they could not solve the problem, asking them to call back customer services, which generated significant customer frustration.

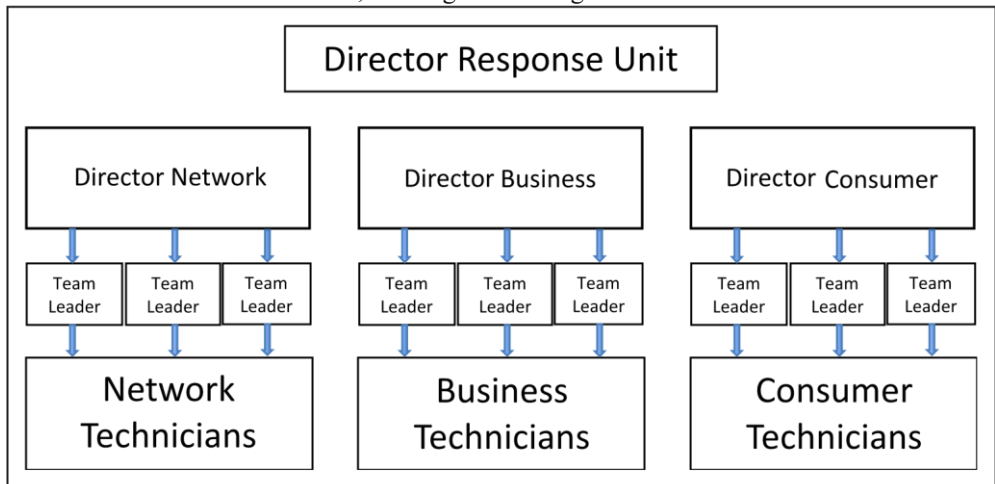


Figure 1. Structure of response units, mid-2000s.

Second, monitoring increased and technicians’ control over the length and timing of their work decreased over time. One union representative observed that consumer technicians had been given tight restrictions on how long they could spend with each customer: ‘The technicians were going back four times to a customer because they had 30 minutes and not 35 to complete their meeting. So at the end of 30 minutes, if he hadn’t fixed the fault, he had to go to the next [. . .] That’s a caricature, but it was really like that’ (FT CCUES rep CGT, 8/12/2011). In addition, after a major restructuring of the technician units in 2006, management shifted from team-level monitoring of performance and targets to the individual level.

Union representatives felt that the motivation for this tightening of control could be traced back to the history of technicians at France Télécom. They were specialists in complex machines and technologies, and developed a collective spirit (*esprit de corps* or *esprit collectif*) linked to strong control over their professional duties, which made managerial control more difficult to exert:

And that is something that management took very badly and always wanted to break. They tried several times, but without success. They always tried to find out what was happening in the technician units, to know how much work they were doing, how they could [. . .] at that time it wasn’t Taylorised, but. . . to quantify the number of tasks, to know how long it lasted, etc. [. . .]. And in most other professions [*métiers*]

this is done, but not among technicians – and that has never been forgiven. (FT union rep CFDT, 12/5/2010)

This population [technicians] has for the most part retained a collective spirit, which they still have. This is impressive [. . .] A technician, he is proud of his profession and above all, he is proud to succeed in solving a customer's problem. And he puts that above everything, to the point that he won't obey his superiors, he will find ways to not strictly follow orders. (FT union rep CFDT, 30/6/2010)

These conditions were accompanied by increasing stress. Technicians interviewed in 2010–2011 expressed two main concerns, consistent with those outlined above.

First, they felt that the value FT/Orange management placed on their technical skills had declined over time. In the past, they had been the company's 'spearhead' (*fer de lance*), with a high level of broad skills that allowed them to manage their daily work and technical projects with some independence. Over the past decade, job restructuring had constrained this control by breaking up tasks. This was experienced by the technicians as a de-valuing of their skills. Increasing value was attached to the professional managerial activity of scheduling 'interventions' (each visit to the customer or repair and maintenance job) and to the technology-led organisation of isolated tasks, which were then assigned to technicians.

Second, this more fragmented or Taylorised model of work organisation did not support technicians' culture of work quality, and many experienced stress associated with the decline of technical standards and customer service quality. They were frustrated that they were often unable to resolve a problem, and that they often experienced direct negative feedback from customers, which they then lacked the autonomy to address.

Interviews illustrate these frustrations:

When we come to a customer for a technical intervention, on the internet for example, if the problem is misdiagnosed by the call centre and is, in fact, related to an external cable [. . .], I officially can't call my colleague who works on external cables. I would have to call it an 'error' on my cell phone program, then it is sent to the dispatcher, who sends it to my colleague. It's always disappointing to the customer, who asks me if we all work in the same company. Actually, with this work organisation, we don't work in the same company. (Consumer technician, 10/03/2011)

Response units were expected to provide high quality customer service, which became much harder when technicians were unable to talk with other specialisations or departments: 'even in the back office, we are all working for the customer. We do our best to facilitate field technicians' activity to solve the customer's problem' (Dispatch technician, 20/04/2011).

The different groups of technicians were managed as performers of discrete activities, whereas technicians wanted to be managed as a global service to customers: 'We are all working for the customer, and I don't care if I spend 30 minutes more on a task if, in the end, it solves the customer's problem' (Network technician, 15/04/2011).

If I could call my colleague myself, it would be faster and more efficient for the customer. But I officially can't, it doesn't mean that I don't do it. [. . .] Sometimes to improve service quality, we have to go above the organisation. When we tell our manager, he tells us it's a good job but he can't reward us for that, because it's not in our objectives. Up there (the HQ), they really don't know our jobs. (Consumer technician, 05/05/2011)

Reorganisation in the technician units after the social crisis

Following the social crisis, there was a range of initiatives across FT/Orange aimed at both reducing stress and changing the model of work organisation. This provided an opportunity for local union representatives to be involved in consultation about and implementation of broader changes in work organisation. In the response units, research by the consulting firm Technologia and by Bellego (2013) had identified particular concerns with stress associated with narrow work organisation, task fragmentation and loss of professional identity.

Management faced two additional problems. First, a large number of technicians were close to retirement. France Télécom had recruited technicians heavily in the 1970s, when the French government invested in the national telecommunications infrastructure. By the mid-2000s there was an 'age pyramid', with a large number of employees between 50 and 60 years old, who were targeted by early retirement plans accompanying the NExT plan. FT/Orange estimated that it would lose 32 per cent of its technician workforce in the response units by 2016. Thus, there was a need to prepare teams for a major loss of skilled employees, concentrated in certain technical areas.

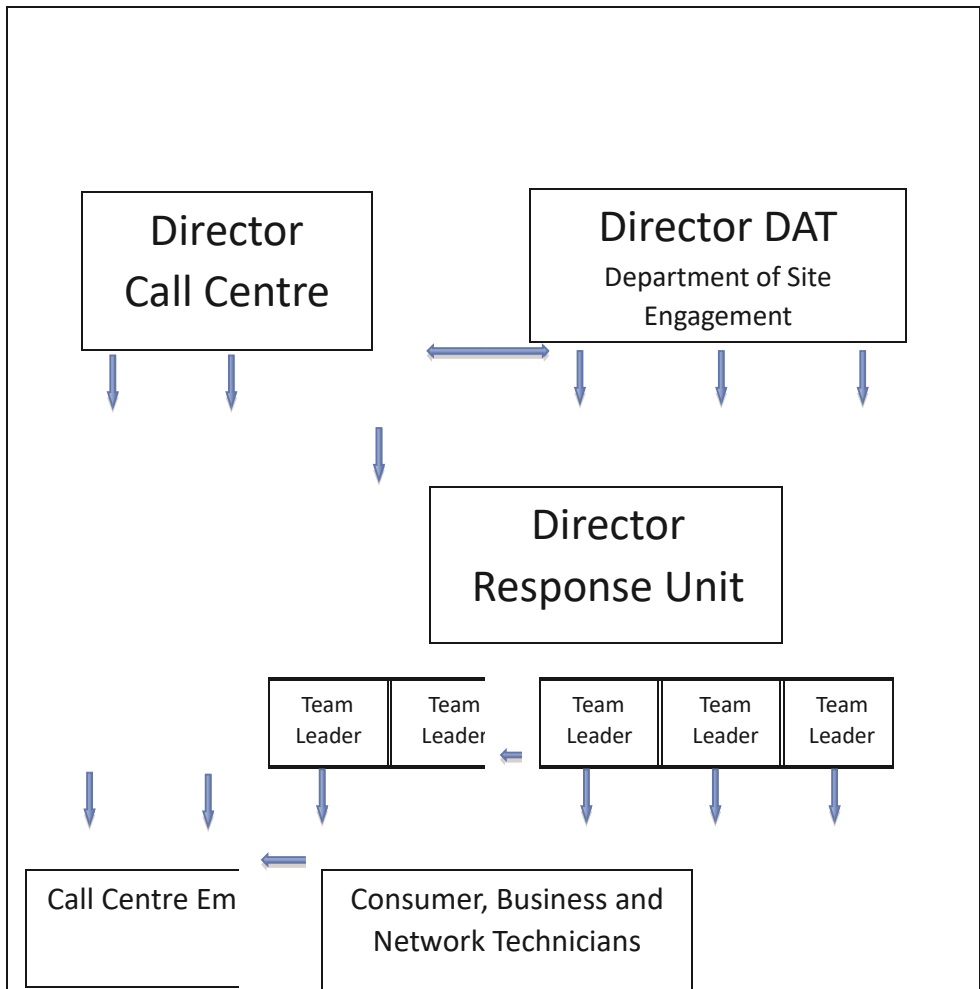


Figure 2. New structure of response units, from 2010.

Second, the response units experienced problems with efficiency, coordination and customer service. Highly skilled technicians found themselves unable to learn new skills necessary for further career progression, as they were unable to work with (and learn from) colleagues in particular specialisations. A strategic focus on improving service quality, to avoid micro-management and adopt larger teams, was supported by central management within the response units with a programme called '*bien du premier coup, parfait du deuxième*' (good the first time, perfect the second) to reduce the rate of '*re-intervention*' or need to return to customers multiple times to resolve problems.

Two changes were made in the late 2000s, both to address concerns with psychosocial stress, connected to the social crisis and social accords, and to improve efficiency and customer service quality. First, technicians were linked to sales and service call centres, to improve coordination between sales and installation. Second, each response unit had the opportunity to establish a new department, a *département adhérence terrain* ('department of site engagement', DAT) based on multi-skilled teams (*équipes multi-compétentes*) that included technicians from each of the major specialisations (Figure 2).

There were three main differences between the old and new models. First, the new structure centred on broader competence or skills rather than narrow specialisations, and was oriented towards resolving the customer's problem. Second, the new structure was based more on technicians' autonomy, as they became responsible for solving problems within their multi-skilled teams. This reduced redundancies in interactions between different functions. In the new model, a technician could call a colleague or the call centre to provide direct feedback on a problem. Third, call centre agents were trained by the technicians to be better able to define the customer's problem as precisely as possible and to direct them to the appropriate technician.

In the first stage of the changes, there was a transition period, which we call 'organisation by skills' because it was built partly on the observations of technicians. During this period, performance indicators were frozen to allow the response units to measure changes in outcomes precisely and to develop new indicators. A working committee made up of the head of human resources, the director of the response units and the financial director oversaw the reorganisation.

Once this transition period was over, the response units sent their new performance indicators to the central technical department, in order to see which ones could be integrated into the national indicators, and which ones should remain local. The previous Taylorised organisation of the response units measured work practices using standardised indicators common to all response units in France. The new organisation by skills measured performance in a way that was dependent on local work practices. This was a radical reversal of past management practices regarding performance: in the old model, technicians had to adapt their work to the performance indicators, whereas in the new model the performance indicators were adapted to technicians' local working practices. This is why the model of organisation by skills has also been called 'field adhesion', following the principle of adapting technical practices to local particularities and the technical and geographical constraints of each city or region.

The 'field adhesion' approach and the reversal of previous Taylorised practices also presented some challenges. In particular, the head office had to manage a large number of location-specific conditions, while remaining embedded in the industrial logic of a large organisation. There were internal conflicts associated with the radical development of more flexible and team-oriented practices within some units and the slower pace in other departments at the time of our research.

Role of the unions and social accords

The social crisis and social accords formed the background for union involvement in implementing the multi-skilled teams. From 2010, as part of the social accords, any organisational change had to pass a psychosocial risk analysis at the regional level to prevent a new crisis. At central level, unions were involved in deciding on the methodology of the analysis, and at the regional level directors decided whether to involve unions in local consultation on the results.

The optional adoption of practices, such as the multi-skilled teams, was viewed positively by union representatives and technicians as it gave them the opportunity to participate more directly in work redesign at the local level. But this ‘local voice’-oriented model also created difficulties and additional costs and growing pains associated with employee or management resistance to changing work organisation. It took, on average, a year for the multi-skilled teams to realise improvements in productivity and customer service, while for many teams, performance declined during that first year.

Union representatives initially had different views on the new structure. In interviews carried out in 2013, CFDT representatives expressed the view that the multi-skilled teams gave their union an opportunity to support the improvement of service quality and customer satisfaction and embraced working together with management to implement the teams in mutually beneficial ways. CGT and SUD representatives expressed more scepticism, arguing that skills should not be added to existing jobs without compensation, and there should instead be a policy of hiring new technicians to fill skill needs. This reflected a more broadly held view that management was using the teams to require technicians to learn new skills or increase the complexity of jobs without pay compensation.

Interviews with union and management representatives in 2013 did suggest, however, that in contrast with past practice, the unions were typically involved in local consultations over restructuring and in the implementation of multi-skilled teams. Managers expressed the view that local union delegates were taken much more seriously than before as social partners with legitimate views on work reorganisation initiatives. This resulted in a gradual but significant change in the culture and practice of labour relations: unions were consulted on changes and many of their suggestions were implemented. Local unions and management showed a greater willingness to work together in many local technician units. By 2017, technicians had secured a small wage increase associated with participation in multi-skilled teams.

At the same time, this new culture of ‘conflict partnership’ was based on balancing employee and employer interests. Managers described the objectives behind the multi-skilled teams in terms of jointly improving working conditions and enhancing productivity and service quality:

We try to develop multi-skills so that we can answer the demands of all kinds of customers and operations on networks. One of our big challenges is to develop these multi-skills aspects so that we can improve efficiency, and also it is also something that is asked for by technical people. They prefer to work in different activities and for different customers than to be specialised in one field of operation. (FT Director, 23/2/2012)

Managers felt that the technicians had come to accept the multi-skilled teams, fluctuations in productivity had declined, and ‘global productivity’ had increased. One HR manager observed that multi-skilled teams contributed to knowledge-sharing:

In team meetings they talk about the business, but above all they talk about problems that they have, in such a way that there is an exchange, and they say: ‘what would you do to resolve this problem in this

kind of case?’ [. . .] And then this experience of collective sharing, through the team meetings but not only in this way – they filter through the company. (FT HR Manager, 8/3/2012)

A field technician described the changes that occurred after his unit adopted the multi-skilled team model in 2014 as largely positive, leading to more effective teamwork and better resolution of customer calls (for example, for customer connections or repairs):

It’s true, it’s good. It’s good because that [to be divided into different teams and buildings] does not create good relations between people. Above all, when you are specialised in an area, you have a tendency when something isn’t so much your area or skill set to leave the work to others. What is good [with the multiskilled teams] is that it breaks down partitions, and you are going to communicate with each other about problems that are essentially the same – that are in another area. (Consumer technician, 27/07/16)

Many of the measures described above were part of a broader effort to improve the working environment and rebuild trust following the social crisis. On the one hand, management was motivated to prevent concerns with stress or authoritarian practices from being reported in the media. The unions were able to threaten to ‘*re-mediatise*’ work organisation issues if they were excluded from decision-making, and they learned that this could be quite an effective tactic to gain concessions. Managers pointed out that the public still refers to ‘France Télécom syndrome’ as a term for stress related to work restructuring. As part of efforts to try to combat this negative image, worker wellbeing or psychosocial health had become a more critical internal performance metric for local and business unit managers. A regular survey evaluated FT/Orange’s progress in this area, and union representatives were involved in designing the survey, evaluating the results and planning measures to mitigate any problems identified. Together, these factors contributed to integrating the unions into formal and informal decision-making structures in areas such as restructuring, working time policy and work organisation.

On the other hand, the social crisis also provided an opportunity for managers who supported alternative models to experiment with these ideas. For example, the Director of the Response Unit, coming from a technical background, had been critical of the NEXt plan and of the Response Unit’s focus on narrow specialisations and targets, maintaining that both would hurt productivity and problem-solving capabilities. Hence, he was more receptive to partnership with the unions as sympathetic stakeholders sharing his critique. In interviews, union representatives repeatedly cited this manager as an important ally and partner in promoting practices for which they had long advocated.

The implications of changes in work organisation were both managerial and cultural. From a managerial point of view, technicians’ work was previously organised in a way that was centrally mandated and measured, and it moved to a model in which skills and task allocation were developed, managed and measured by the technical teams themselves. This change in managerial approach affected work indicators, the transmission of knowledge and skills, and the emergence of multi-skilled technicians, among other outcomes.

The biggest change, however, was cultural. FT/Orange was best known at that time for its managerial toughness and its organisational rigidity. The broader paradigm shift that accompanied these work reorganisation initiatives showed the technicians that a more human approach that took their professional identity into consideration was more than just empty words or ‘management speak’. Instead, positive outcomes for both the technicians and FT/Orange were generated through a process of co-construction, resulting in a real reversal in professional practices.

Discussion and conclusions

In France, despite the presence of many formal voice mechanisms, institutions such as works councils and union delegates typically do not support significant, independent worker input into management decision-making. Maurice and Sellier (1979: 329) observed that ‘French labour law has continually produced institutions for cooperation, which have not made any change in the way the [French] company operates.’

At France Télécom/Orange, however, firm- and workplace-level institutions became more meaningful as vehicles for worker voice following the social crisis. Normative values associated with employee well-being and psychosocial health became a legitimate objective of management practice, given new primacy on the agenda of management decision-making. Collective voice was backed up by the very real threat that high rates of psychosocial stress would bring negative media attention, and was further supported by unions’ involvement in regular surveys and in the implementation of the social accords. In the case of FT/Orange, the social crisis also empowered managers who had been critical of the NExT plan and deskilling associated with work restructuring. This allowed them to partner with unions to implement work reorganisation that pursued enhanced performance through investment in employee skills and commitment rather than discipline and top-down control.

Our findings can be interpreted using the framework of organisational and institutional experimentation. Similar to cases analysed by Connolly (2020) and Pulignano et al. (2020), experimentation took place against the backdrop of organisational restructuring. Unions at FT/Orange reacted against draconian restructuring measures implemented by the CEO and some top managers. These measures caused such a deterioration in workers’ well-being that it led to despair among many employees and in some cases even their death (Chabrak et al., 2016). In their efforts to find an effective response, unions and managers engaged in organisational experimentation, drawing on complementary resources.

In our case, however, a prior shift in the balance of power in favour of unions and workers was crucial. In a previous article, we showed that FT/Orange’s unions managed to mobilise the internal workforce and gain public support through a communicative strategy that brought the crisis to the media’s attention and established workers’ well-being and psychosocial health as legitimate concerns and priorities in organisational strategy (Doellgast et al., 2021). That case could be reinterpreted using Murray et al.’s (2020) framework as a case of mutually constitutive organisational and institutional experimentation, in which an ‘ephemeral response’ to a crisis was successfully scaled up and institutionalised, at both company and national level.

This article picks up where that one left off. In this new context, following the replacement of top executives, managers who were concerned with the costs of Taylorised work organisation were empowered to experiment with new, more high-involvement approaches to work organisation and skills (Vidal, 2022). This strategy was underpinned by, and further contributed to, the institutionalisation of joint arrangements on monitoring efforts to reduce psychosocial stress in the company, through agreements on voluntary mobility, work organisation and work-life balance; a commitment to regularly survey employees on stress; and consolidating employee committees with new coordination powers. The growing role of the unions in decision-making within the firm led to a new institutional equilibrium that can be defined as ‘conflict partnership’ (Müller-Jentsch, 2016), as it was based on the union’s ability to threaten to resume the conflict with management if they were excluded from the decision-making process.

As is typical in a single case study, the generalisability of our findings is limited: unions’ experience at FT/Orange is not necessarily a prescriptive model for unions hoping to build countervailing power in other contexts, including in other organisational settings within France.

The case is unusual in many regards. FT/Orange is a former state-owned company with traditionally strong unions, and the wave of suicides represented a unique incident that was particularly visible to the public and potentially highly damaging to a customer-focused company. In some respects, this case is more indicative of the structural weakness of French unions, as it took an extraordinary event to turn around their former incapacity to influence management decision-making. In addition, the work reorganisation initiatives at FT/Orange remained limited in their transformative potential, as their success was still measured primarily in terms of their impact on cost and productivity.

At the same time, findings from the FT/Orange case provide lessons for the conditions under which unions can creatively use strategies of organisational and institutional experimentation to combat narrow, Taylorist models of work organisation. The psychosocial stress that FT/Orange technicians experienced, associated with fragmentation of tasks and loss of control over their work, has been found among telecommunications technicians in other countries (MacKenzie and Marks, 2019). Our findings suggest that unions can be partners in improving these conditions through encouraging investments in skill and discretion. But ultimately, that partnership needs to be based on a more equal balance of power to ensure that worker interests and collective voice are given sufficient weight in decision-making.

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