



## Belgium: recasting the work organisation of civil servants

The dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought about wide-reaching changes to the working environment. The modern public sector is driven by the expansion of digital technology and fiscal performance levels. The Belgian federal government is constantly innovating and rolling out new organisation methods which, whilst upending certain practices, are geared towards adjusting to society's new requirements. To ensure optimum take-up, these changes are designed with a strong human element.

Stemming from the 2000 Copernicus reform overseen by Guy Verhofstadt, the then Prime Minister, whose goal was to “depoliticise the senior civil service”, all the former ministries with the exception of the Ministry of Defence were renamed Federal Public Services<sup>1</sup> (FPS). The FPS are headed up by a management committee chaired by a senior civil servant who is tasked with operational management. A strategic council acts as an interface between the management committee and the strategic cell which reports to the minister. These third bodies have replaced the former ministerial private offices. There have been 11 FPS since the FPS Policy and Support<sup>2</sup> was set up on 1 March 2017.

Although the onus was on the flagship dismantling of ministerial private offices, the main thrust of the reform was to “re-engineer the federal administration into a modern, performing and customer-oriented organisation<sup>3</sup>”. New HR management methods were introduced, such as senior civil servants being appointed for a fixed term (*nominations sur mandate*)<sup>4</sup> and assessments<sup>5</sup> of the management skills of applicants for these positions.

### Making seemingly unthinkable changes to a government department

The freshly-appointed head of the FPS Social Security, Frank Van Massenhove, soon stood out from the crowd. This federal administration had one of the worst images, not only in the eyes of the general public but also with civil servants who were less and less motivated to work there<sup>6</sup>. Frank Van Massenhove was convinced that the two points were related and were contributing to a vicious cycle so he strived to pinpoint the reasons for the increasing loss of appeal. After conducting a number of surveys with his staff, he concluded that the way in which work was organised had become the major stumbling block.

This organisation no longer matched the expectations of the younger generation for whom assured job security was not enough for them to take the plunge and join the civil service. These so-called digital natives or generation Y “refused to be told how to do their jobs<sup>7</sup>”. What was needed was a full overhaul of management culture, working methods and even hierarchical relationships. Drawing on strategies rolled out in the private sector and being utterly persuaded that they could be adapted to his organisational structure, the new chairman tabled a raft of measures that shook up the working lives of his 1,400 members of staff.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.belgium.be/en/about\\_belgium/government/federal\\_authorities/federal\\_and\\_planning\\_public\\_services](https://www.belgium.be/en/about_belgium/government/federal_authorities/federal_and_planning_public_services)

<sup>2</sup> The FPS Policy and Support was created through the merger of the FPS Personnel and Organisation, the FPS Budget and Management Control and a number of agencies (Selor, IFA, FED+, PersoPoint, Fedict and Empreva).

<sup>3</sup> <https://pyramides.revues.org/775>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.selor.be/fr/procedures/top-managers/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.selor.be/fr/tests/tests-devant-un-jury/centre-d%E2%80%99assessment/>

<sup>6</sup> In 2005, only 17% of applicants for federal positions checked the FPS Social Security as their number one choice.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.bbtonline.eu/newsletter/take\\_plus5/docs/MPI\\_BE\\_CONFERENCE.pdf](http://www.bbtonline.eu/newsletter/take_plus5/docs/MPI_BE_CONFERENCE.pdf)

The first deep-seated and high-profile change was to allow as many staff as possible to work remotely (at home for instance) for one to three days per week coupled with a broad flexitime system. Referring to the studies he carried out, Frank Van Massenhove maintained that 92% of staff could benefit from these arrangements<sup>8</sup> which were introduced on a voluntary basis. Today, he is proud to note that only 23% of staff have chosen to continue working all week in the FPS's premises in Brussels. And for the 8% who are needed on location, their working days have been cut by 90 minutes by way of compensation<sup>9</sup>.

## Wellbeing in the workplace as a catalyst for action

Obviously this radical recasting that started in the FPS Social Security was duly noted by the managers of the other departments and by the members of successive governments. As the rate of occupancy of the premises inevitably fell, the management team embarked on a severe streamlining strategy. All closed offices were replaced by open-plan ones. Nobody – irrespective of their position or supervisory capacity – has their own office space. Employees sit in a free space and there are confidentiality compartments for one-on-one meetings. This has led to substantial savings<sup>10</sup> which have justified continuation of the process.

But, this was not Frank Van Massenhove's goal. As a strident advocate of "happiness in the workplace<sup>11</sup>", he believes that "what motivates people is to work in an atmosphere of respect and trust for an organisation that is well respected by society". To this end, he rode roughshod over a number of taboos:

- Ensuring **transparency** for publications: "We have a simple rule: always tell the truth. And it doesn't matter if the truth isn't flattering: as long as it's the truth, the employees can say it".
- Introducing **employee-assessment of managers**: "If the managers had a poor performance review, then they were demoted... So they had to change, they had no alternative".
- Freeing up **communication and the use of new media**: "In most companies, you're not supposed to go onto social network sites on company time. But we don't have specific hours and we encourage our employees to go onto social networks".

The process was rolled out by almost exclusive and intensive use of cutting-edge digital applications (secure remote access, meetings using instant messaging, approval circuits modelled into workflows) and has been successful both in-house and externally. The results speak for themselves as the FPS Social Security has not only become a more appealing employer (it reports on the new organisation on a regular basis<sup>12</sup>), but, in eight years, the timeframe for processing cases has fallen from 18 months to an average of four and a half.

## A one-off or an example to follow?

Although the outcome has been positive, such a challenge is largely connected to the character of its instigator and the strength of his convictions. However, the other FPSs have followed in his footsteps at least as regards pushing teleworking which has been enshrined by a royal decree<sup>13</sup>. According to the most recent survey carried out in the civil service, a quarter of staff have now opted for this arrangement, ten times more than five years ago<sup>14</sup>. Other options have been introduced such as the opening, last May, of 15 satellite offices throughout the country<sup>15</sup>. These offices provide federal employees with an alternative workplace closer to their homes.

Béatrice Collin, spokesperson for the Ministry of Defence in charge of the Civil Service, recently stated that "civil servants need to be able to manage both when and where they work. This leads to a better work/life balance<sup>16</sup>". She pointed out that teleworking is part of a wider initiative to improve employees' wellbeing; this is now one of the federal civil service's priorities. The government has also announced that it will be tabling an "anti-burnout plan" in the coming months<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://imatechnologies.wordpress.com/2013/07/01/nous-ne-sommes-chapeutes-par-aucune-hierarchie/>  
<sup>9</sup> <http://www.20minutes.fr/economie/1720127-20151029-directrice-bonheur-securite-sociale-belge>  
<sup>10</sup> After the refitting, annual savings for the FPS's offices amount of €6 million.  
<sup>11</sup> <https://socialsecurity.belgium.be/fr/au-sujet-de-lorganisation/comment-devenir-le-regisseur-de-votre-propre-vie>  
<sup>12</sup> [http://www.etaamb.be/fr/arrete-royal-du-07-octobre-2011\\_n2011002049.html](http://www.etaamb.be/fr/arrete-royal-du-07-octobre-2011_n2011002049.html)  
<sup>13</sup> <https://socialsecurity.belgium.be/fr/events/seance-dinformation-sur-la-nouvelle-maniere-de-travailler-5>  
<sup>14</sup> <https://infocenter.belgium.be/fr/statistiques/fonction-publique-administrative-federale/bien-etre-organisation-conditions-de-travail/teletravail>  
<sup>15</sup> <https://fedweb.belgium.be/fr/actualites/2017/travail-en-bureau-satellite-lancement-officiel>  
<sup>16</sup> <http://www.dhnet.be/actu/societe/le-teletravail-dans-la-fonction-publique-ca-cartonne-57e960dacd7045542b21d565>  
<sup>17</sup> <http://www.lalibre.be/debats/ripostes/le-teletravail-est-il-la-solution-contre-le-burn-out-ripostes-591dc44acd702b5fba6dccb>