

### Xavier Tackoen

Managing Director of *Espaces-Mobilités*, an independent Brussels-based consultancy firm that has been advising public authorities, transport operators and companies on public space and mobility issues for nearly 25 years. *Espaces-Mobilités* has created a laboratory, called *Maestromobile*, focussing on behaviour change to accompany people towards responsible mobility. It also develops training courses.

Interview conducted on 29 July 2022

#### **Is commuting from home to work and from work to home a key lever for HRMs wishing to contribute to reducing their organisation's carbon emissions?**

"When we analyse companies' carbon footprint, particularly in the services sector, we see that it is indeed weighed down by travel: it is the black mark in all corporate environmental strategies. More and more organisations are realising that this is the main battle horse. However, as a research and consultancy firm, we are mainly contacted by companies for much less strategic matters: organising a one-off awareness-raising event on mobility, experimenting with new modes of travel, etc. It is very rare that the issue of mobility is approached from a genuine carbon-reduction perspective, at least in terms of HR. That said, this experiential dimension is a very interesting way of entering the field because it avoids 'philosophical' discussions by putting people directly into action. When you come to a company with an electric scooter, you arouse curiosity. Small events like these have the virtue of sparking more strategic thinking afterwards."

#### **If HR is interested in mobility, how much of the motivation is 'environmental' compared to other issues?**

"Not very high, but I would like to say that this is good! I am convinced that mobility should not be approached directly from the environmental angle. The environmental dimension will be the positive result, the objective towards which we must strive. But it is not the communication tool. When we take an interest in cities that have really started to change - such as Copenhagen, for example - we see that people move differently, not for environmental reasons, but for reasons of convenience, efficiency, community... In short, for reasons linked to human behaviours. And that is why HR is the right entry point. Employees should be supported in relation to their real needs. They are not going to change their behaviour because it improves the company's carbon footprint, but because they are going to have new options to improve their family management, make their journeys more pleasant... and, ultimately, have a positive impact on the planet. All the people who, with the pandemic, changed their habits by cycling to work, for example, will not go back to previous ways, because they have discovered a habit that improves their well-being and has multiple benefits."



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### **Has the pandemic changed the way we look at mobility issues?**

"We are still in a post-pandemic period of transition with lock-downs that totally reshuffled the cards. Everything seems to be a bit on hold while we wait to have more clarity. The last health regulations were lifted several months ago, but remote working practices are still in place. We have had fewer requests from companies in the last 12-18 months than in the past. On the other hand, public authorities have launched a great number of projects to redevelop public spaces. At this stage, companies are understandably under the expectation: they are going through one crisis after another. But these crises always have a link with mobility. With the health crisis, we fell into the absence of mobility. Today, the energy crisis is leading to an increase in the cost of mobility. Companies no longer know which way to turn. They find it difficult to establish long-term strategies in the face of all these crises and in an environment that is too volatile."

### **What role can HR play in commuting habits?**

"HR can be a fantastic engine when the department is aware of the potential for transformation - especially if it goes beyond the ecological, technological and financial aspects - and understands that mobility is one of the pillars of well-being at work. The approaches can then be very transversal. As I said, promoting cycling can, for example, contribute to improving physical fitness, stimulating concentration at work, and even fostering community life. On the other hand, if the approach is limited to reacting to changing legislation on company cars or to new constraints linked to environmental permits, the approach is reactive, and HR is then caught in the middle of individuals who will resist the change. In HR, there may be a fear of the administrative overload and budget impact that may accompany actions on mobility, but there is also a fear of the workers reaction. In Belgium, for example, the company car is part of a managed system, and therefore without surprises. On the other hand, the new modes of transportation are much less controlled by HR and, accordingly, are met with a lot of resistance and reticence. If a company launches a mobility budget, there is a good chance that it will take two years of internal discussions to reach a result, and in the end, few employees will sign up to it. It is much better to work with pilot projects, with small groups of ambassadors ready to play this role. My message to HR is: don't revolutionise mobility in your company; start with people who are willing, and with small initiatives that will germinate and grow. In this way, top management will be able to follow you because you will have demonstrated achievements on a small scale. One aspect that is often not under the control of HR, but which should be linked to the implementation of initiatives to reduce private car travel, is the potential savings in infrastructure: people often do not realise the considerable cost of parking in or near the company. Hardly any company keeps an analytical account of mobility."



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### **In Belgium, the company car is at the centre of the debate on mobility. What is your view on this?**

"In my opinion, it is a mistake to focus the debate on the issue of the (suppression of the) company car. In France, for example, there is no such interesting tax-efficient company car system and yet the average French person drives just as much as the average Belgian. In any case, the beneficiaries of a company car are all in function and salary levels that have the capacity to acquire a vehicle. I am not saying that nothing should be done. I am in favour of a shift to the augmented rather than the diminished car: continue to have a company car, possibly smaller, with better environmental performance, but let's also give people the opportunity to travel differently. This does not always require increasing the offer, but just agreeing to facilitate access to public transport or other forms of mobility. There is a plethora of multimodal solutions on offer today. On the other hand, in Belgium, employees who have a company car generally also receive an unlimited fuel card - not always, and this is changing with the energy crisis, but the practice is still extremely widespread. There is thereby no reason not to drive a lot, both for business and pleasure. There is a real potential for analysis there. There are good examples of companies that have introduced stricter parking standards - if there are alternatives to the car, there is no reason for the company to provide free parking and it can be paid for. Alternatively, the company can provide free parking for 10 or 15 days a year, in case of exceptional need. Similarly, the company may not give an unlimited fuel card because the lack of a limit does not encourage reasonable behaviour. The company can put a limit on the number of kilometers per year, and even combine this with a reward if the employees spend less on fuel than they were entitled to. It is not so much the company car that is the big problem, but its use. Maintain company cars for your employees, but encourage them to use them as little as possible. The conversation then changes from one of removing a benefit to one of keeping it, but using it sensibly. A bit like with the granting of a computer: just because employees receive a computer does not mean that they have to use it all the time, day and night, week and weekend. Employees can use their company car when they need it on the weekend, or for holidays, but hardly at all during the week if the possibility exists for them to come to work by public transport or by bike. This has a direct impact on fuel consumption."

### **What advice do you have for taking action on mobility?**

"When we support mobility managers, for example, we always say to them: don't do campaigns with posters in the lift, because you don't change any behaviour by doing that; go to the cafeteria three times a week to talk to people, take an interest in their mobility and their concerns, suggest ways forward, in short, personalise your approach for each person. This takes time and energy. Of course, it is easier to sit behind your desk and make a nice PowerPoint. But working seriously on mobility requires you to get out of your comfort zone. Mobility is not discussed in a room, in a meeting. It is lived in the



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public space and you have to be curious in your city, in other cities when you travel. Networking is essential. It is also important to get trained: in Belgium, we have been training Mobility Managers since 2004. I always say to the people I train: if you encounter a problem or an obstacle, there are dozens of others who have had it before you; don't try to solve it on your own in front of your computer. Use the network!"

### **Should the company have a Mobility Manager?**

"What is important is to have an internal person who leads the mobility project and, ideally, reports to the general management, because the mandate is transversal: communication, HR, facilities, etc. The person can come from any department - and, why not, from HR - but must have direct contact with top management and the management team. The person can come from any department - and why not from HR - but he or she must have direct contact with top management and staff representatives. This person must then be trained in mobility issues. In terms of approach, we suggest three pillars: Plan, Operate, Activate. The first part is the diagnosis and definition of a strategy. Then comes the implementation with mobility services, data management, financial monitoring, infrastructures, etc. Most companies stop there and then see that it doesn't work. Why is this? Simply because the behavioural change dimension is missing. All of the above is necessary, but not sufficient. You have to 'activate'. When a company tells you that it has placed ten electric bicycles in the reception area, but no one uses them, this step is missing: activation. You haven't motivated people. Motivating them can be done in different ways, like organising a game with a reward for those who use them the most, for example."

### **What do companies think too little about?**

"To act at the level of geographical clusters: not all companies experience the same realities, but there are many shared factors. If the Mobility or HR managers of companies, even from different sectors, work together in a 500- to 800-metre area around a transportation hub - a train station, a metro station, etc. - they will be able to start a dynamic and, above all, to go and meet the public authorities, the public transport operators and the mobility services and say to them: 'There are, let's say, 30 of us; we have identified such and such a need; what can we do about it'. If just one company comes, it will have no impact. With 30 companies, the situation changes. You need this scale to have an impact. On the other hand, in my experience, the amount of money that companies are prepared to spend on mobility issues at a strategic level is ridiculous compared to what they can spend on tax optimisation or on HR service providers. For awareness raising activities, it is still eight to ten times less. It is impossible with such low ambitions to really change things. Unfortunately, we can see that working on mobility is still perceived as a constraint by companies, and not as a real opportunity to change their environmental impact. Yet the return on investment on mobility projects can be direct and very significant."



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### What traps should we not fall into?

"A classic trap is communicating about the environment: this is a bad idea. Communicate about the human side. Moreover, mobilise ambassadors, ideally top management: when the CEO gets on their bike and does this regularly, it has a major effect on the organisation. Another pitfall is ignoring or not understanding the importance of critical mass for mobility. A public company will only change a bus line for 5,000 to 8,000 people, not for fewer. Finally, the lack of transparency is almost a guarantee of failure: if you produce mobility plans top down, without involving the trade unions, without making sure you have ambassadors, without testing things on the ground, it won't work. Mobility is one of the most sensitive subjects in companies. And once the damage is done, it is extremely difficult to get back into a positive dynamic. You also have to be prepared to go backwards when you make a mistake and accept to review your plans."



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