



## Articles & Commentaries



### p-Watch — Europe



by Anthony C. Hubert, president of EuroJobs, an organization he established to promote efforts to raise the quality of working life and productivity in Europe. He was formerly Secretary-General of the European Association of National Productivity Centres. He writes regularly for this column.

#### France's agile ANACT

France was one of the first countries to dismantle its national productivity center (in 1968, the year of great societal unrest). Earlier it had been one of the last recipients of Marshall Plan aid to create that institution. Not least of the reasons was French trade unions' dislike of the word "productivity" and their less-than-enthusiastic cooperation with employers to improve it. Yet France's productivity performance has been world-class. Perhaps confrontation begets competitiveness.

**"By optimizing workplace organization it is possible to improve the quality of work, as well as employees' creativity and innovation and thus to increase productivity."**

On the other hand, growing recognition of the importance of human capital in national competitiveness has been translated into a range of legal requirements that employers, managers, and workers must meet in all but small companies. Thus, the skills of the workforce should be raised by levying training taxes; and company-level labor management cooperation is mandatory, as is the employment of disabled persons, etc. To help implement such laws, two new agencies arose from the ashes of the productivity center. One agency fostered management education, in which today France is a European leader; the other has broadened and clarified the supply of life-long learning in the wake of the training laws.

A third body, established in the early 1970s, was added to promote improvements in working conditions and, more broadly, the quality of working life. It was this third agency, Agence Nationale pour l'Amélioration des Conditions de Travail (ANACT), that took up France's baton in the European productivity movement. It fully concurs with the EU's 2006 Helsinki Declaration: "By optimizing workplace organization it is possible to improve the quality of work, as well as employees' creativity and innovation and thus to increase productivity." Productivity, in other words, is not its goal but a requisite by-product.

ANACT has the prime characteristics of a national productivity center, albeit with

certain Gallic accents. Thus it has a tripartite governing council, but, as a state agency, it is the government that appoints the director, provides its income (€20 million annually, with four-year contracts), and has the final say in the agency's activities. Employers might show some signs of reluctance to play along with its somewhat social focus on "working conditions," but on the other hand they can emphasize the required economic dimensions of social change. ANACT's work can provide employers with guidance in implementing new working life rules and regulations by, for example, pioneering pilot projects.

Importantly, ANACT keeps its nose to the ground. In other words, its focus is experimental change projects within companies. Actions for individual large enterprises are carried out by the 80-strong central staff on such key socioeconomic issues as problems of the aging workforce, stress, absenteeism, and musculoskeletal disorders. Since market rates for consultancy are charged, projects provide a regular source of the total revenues of ANACT. However, to ensure a balance of activity and not be tempted solely by projects because they provide juicy income, the council has set a 10% ceiling on this source in any year. The key purpose of such assignments is to provide ANACT with an up-to-date window on the world of work and how best to nurture and harness human potential.

**"A recent innovation to broaden and heighten general and media awareness of ANACT and its missions is an annual week focusing on one aspect of improving the quality of working life."**

ANACT's 25 regional bodies, Agences Regionale pour l'Amélioration des Conditions de Travail, conduct experimental activities for smaller firms. They were set up and partially financed (using one-third of the central government's annual grant) by ANACT together with regional government units in the 1980s and 1990s as mirror images of the national agency. But their 220-odd staff, unlike the center's, have a more flexible status than state employees. Projects, usually lasting one year, bring together up to 50 smaller firms confronted with similar working life issues. Although locally managed, with an individual industry focus, the expertise of the total ANACT network, particularly of the center, is tapped.

For both types of projects considerable importance is attached to broadcasting the results. Two aspects are particularly important: first, information needs to be easily understandable by people in working life, and therefore staff specialists are required to produce popularized pamphlets, in double-quick time; and second, information must heighten the whole network's image in the community. A recent innovation to broaden and heighten general and media awareness of ANACT and its missions is an annual week focusing on one aspect of improving the quality of working life. In 2009, the week examined stress, an economic and social bane affecting at least 40% of the French working population. Thus, what can be done to alleviate stress is equally of interest to employers and trade unions. More than 100 events were held across the country, with the focal one being a national conference attracting 1,500 participants in June.

If ANACT as such is not, nor should it be, a research body disseminating erudite papers, it must, like productivity centers, become more involved in training and higher education. Thus in addition to offering a score of courses in its focal areas, it has recently set up a diploma course in work management jointly with

a university, attracting some 400 participants. Also like productivity centers, ANACT has seized opportunities for developing resources that the state or even the social partners have experienced trouble in managing. Thus ANACT has become adept at tapping the funds accumulated from the taxes levied on firms if they do not employ a sufficient proportion of the disabled or provide their workers with sufficient training for their own projects. A national fund, Fonds pour l'Amélioration des Conditions de Travail (FACT), was set up in the 1980s to provide companies with seed money to try to resolve common problems in working conditions which are not covered by law. Because of heavy bureaucracy, the annual funds were never consumed. Now that ANACT has taken over their handling, all is appropriately spent. The monies in question are not negligible: FACT's annual budget is €3 million.

Finally, ANACT is a fan of evaluations. Not only are these required by the government but, even more important, they are sought by staff. Recently, their focus has shifted from activity to impact: how much transfer has taken place, how many consultants have been trained, how many hits have there been on the Web site on which items, etc. The Web site is seen as the means of providing visitors with all the necessary information in a nutshell along with sources of more detailed information if needed.



[Back to list](#)

---

To top of page