

ACTION-RESEARCH WITHIN INTER-COMPANY PARTNERSHIPS:

CAN INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURS THEORISE THEIR OWN EFFORTS AT INSTITUTIONALISATION?

Virginie Xhaufclair, LENTIC/HEC-ULg, GREGOR/IAE de Paris ¹

François Pichault, LENTIC/ HEC-ULg, ESCP-EAP Paris

Summary:

In the current context of a crisis in social regulation, the issue of institutionalisation of new forms of compromise has gained central importance. The “local” level is increasingly more often presented as one of the levers for recasting social regulation. This involves designing a new framework for interaction between the micro-economic stakeholders on the labour market. In this way, our research focused on the conditions for institutionalisation of compromises implemented at inter-company level conciliating the need for flexibility and security. We adopted a field approach, anchored in “flexicurity” practices implemented at local level. In order to do this, we set up a partnership made up of the various stakeholders on the labour market in our region, within the framework of a European action-research project. With these partners’ collaboration, we observed the existing practices and tested new practices as part of pilot projects, whose failure and/or success (qualified in terms of “desirability” of the compromises implemented) provided us with a wealth of longitudinal data. Having become veritable “institutional entrepreneurs” through spurring on and supporting these experiments, we have contributed to the development, alongside our “practitioner” partners, of a flexicurity practices analysis grid. It allows their desirability to be qualified and helps guide the implementation of such innovations. We then returned to our status of researchers, transforming this “local” knowledge into generic knowledge actionable through an abductive process that establishes links between our own theorisation and the existing knowledge in the scientific field.

Key-words: action-research, institutional entrepreneurship, translation, abduction, flexicurity

¹ Virginie Xhaufclair
LENTIC, HEC-ULG
Bd du Rectorat, 19, B51, 4000 Liège
v.xhaufclair@ulg.ac.be
Tél. : 00 32 (0)4 366 30 70
Fax : 00 32 (0)4 366 29 47

Introduction

Over the last twenty years, many academics and other “authorities” in management have been putting forward the theory of “transformation”, which states that companies are confronted with the necessity to modify traditional forms of work organisation, anchored in the hierarchy, bureaucracy and specialisation of “Fordism” and “Taylorism”. This theory is based on the observation that introduction of new technologies has enabled globalisation of exchanges and reinforced competition on an international scale. These new technologies have also accelerated the launch of new processes and products or services, correspondingly introducing the constraint of intensive and continual innovation (Hatchuel, *et al.*, 2005). The theory of transformation implies new ways of envisaging human resources, now considered as a competitive edge and not just a simple production factor. It is thus the quality and distinctiveness of the product and services developed that allows our western economies to remain competitive and offer to employees who are increasingly better qualified and certified jobs that are consistent with their skills and desires for career enhancement.

This perspective of “transformation” also requires special attention be given to flexibility – both at home and abroad – of the labour market. It is said to be the foundation of new forms of work organisation required by this transformed economy. In any event, this is the option chosen by the European Commission in its Guidelines for Jobs, in which the concept of “Adaptability” is one of the main elements. Already at the end of the 1990’s, the European Commission had incorporated transformation theory into its strategy and promoted new types of jobs that were more flexible and adaptable, placing them in a framework of guaranteed protection and social rights. The green book of 1997 “Partnership for a new organization of work” encourages their development through new forms of partnership, with a view to organisation of work that is more productive, participatory and enriching. The Commission invited the various stakeholders on the labour market to endeavour at all relevant levels – European, nationally, sectors, locally and companies themselves – to revamp the legal frameworks and negotiate new agreements. This “invitation” has since been repeated several times (via the Communication in 1998 on the “Modernisation of the Organisation of Work”, the Lisbon Agenda defined in 2001, The green paper in 2008 on Modernising Labour Law, etc.) and started a debate in the various Member States on the required character and terms of this modernisation, leading some of them to reform various aspects of labour regulation (for example, French laws on working time and economic regulations, the Hartz laws in Germany, CCT Plus-minus measure in the Belgian automobile industry, etc.). This dynamic was exacerbated with the theorisation of the “concept” of Flexicurity (Wilthagen and Rogowski, 2002), based on the analysis of reforms conducted in the Netherlands (Flexwet) and Denmark during the 1990’s. The Commission quickly adopted this approach as the spearhead for the reforms it promotes, and many Member States started to progress down the different “roads to Flexicurity” put forward by the Commission’s group of experts².

The reforms proposed and carried out within this framework mainly concern regulation of the labour market on a macro-economic level. It is a question of re-engineering the basic principles and fundamental tools of jobs policy: recasting employment contracts and social protection, implementing active jobs policies, transitional markets, etc. However, the Commission’s project explicitly seeks to develop new forms of partnership and give rise to innovation at all levels, including and especially at “local” level. This term does not refer to a

² « Flexicurity Pathways. Turning hurdles into stepping stones », Report by the European Expert Group on Flexicurity, June 2007, available on line here: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=117&langId=fr>

specific geographical and/or administrative scope. Instead, it represents the antithesis of the “central” level, which is found on a national, federal and European scale. It should be understood in a broad sense, designating (sub) regionally anchored collective initiatives, emerging “in the field” processes likely over time to influence (and interact with) processes and reforms generated by central regulation institutions.

It in fact seems that the avowed conviction, over the last few years, that it is necessary to deregulate to encourage free enterprise on an open market is now being superseded by the interest in developing ad hoc regulations, within new scopes, in order to ensure socially responsible reconciliation of the respective requirements for flexibility and security. In this way, “local” anchoring is promoted, since it is deemed to encourage relations (by generating dense and direct interaction between the players), accelerate circulation of information, facilitate mobilisation of resources and the design of tailor-made solutions for complex and specific problems encountered in the field (McIlroy *et al.*, 2004). This faith in the relevance of the local level for developing new forms is today shared by an increasing number of players on the scene. The interest of the economic world and academic circles for the new perimeters and levers for action incarnated by competitive clusters, local productive systems, industrial districts, inter-company partnerships, territorial schemes, etc., is proof of this (Retour, 2008 ; Benko *et al.*, 1992).

What these multiple and multi-valued partnerships have in common is that they are based on a network logic (Powell, 1990; Butera, 1991; Allouche *et al.*, 1998), considered, wrongly or rightly, to be the type of economic organisation best adapted to globalisation of the economy. Without becoming involved in this debate, we have nonetheless observed that these networks greatly transform management methods as well as modes of interaction and forms of inter-dependence between economic players. In particular, they lead to a triangulation of employment relations (employer, employee, user) which results in a dissociation of economic and social responsibilities (Sobczak, 2003), as well as the risk of placing the worker in a precarious position and removing the legal employer from the equation. The major stake in these types of network is therefore the re-structuring of power relationships between the stakeholders. Indeed, relationships that are too skewed can lead to unbalanced and untenable situations in the long term because they are too insecure for the parties concerned.

The reasons behind the actions at work within inter-company partnerships do not naturally lead to cooperation. Nevertheless, inasmuch as these inter-company partnerships are considered to be amongst the new scopes of reference for building new institutions for social regulation, it is essential to pay attention to the way in which they may emerge, structure and anchor themselves (Rorive, 2005) on a basis of compromises satisfactory to all the stakeholders involved. The complexity of interactions and the multitude of interests present raise the question of how is it possible to set up the trust necessary for the smooth running of inter-company cooperation (Thorelli, 1986; Bradach *et al.*, 1989; Powell, 1990).

Research conducted by Orléan (1994), Geindre (2005) and Volckrick (2007), shows that it is notably through the introduction of an independent third-party and mediation that this mutual trust can be guaranteed. The action-research work that we relate in this article is a response to such ideas. In fact, it highlights the – essential – role of the third party played by our research centre during a study devoted to identifying conditions for institutionalisation of compromises reconciling flexibility/security at inter-company level.

This research uses an empirical basis involving the stimulation and implementation of innovative social regulation practices at local level. The aim of our work was in fact to identify the conditions for economically and socially responsible flexicurity by experimenting with this concept in the field in micro-economic terms. We therefore carried out field work to identify requirements, mobilise the players, formalise the different steps of the innovation process, manage conflicts whilst maintaining support for the initiative, assess and perpetuate the new schemes put in place, etc. This methodological option enabled us to gather extremely dense and subtle data that also boasted a longitudinal dimension vital for studying the process of institutionalisation. Nevertheless, this option raised the question of our capacity to analyse such data and our role as a third party with the required distance and objectivity.

As such, after several methodical indications and the presentation of two case studies to illustrate our point, we will consecrate the first part of this article to analysing the role of the third party played by the researcher involved. To this effect, we will use the institutional entrepreneurship theory (DiMaggio, 1988) and actor-network theory (Akrich *et al.*, 1988a; 1988b), as well as applying a model that incorporates their respective contributions (Leca *et al.*, 2006) to our own experience in the field. These theories present an interesting conceptual framework for the action-researcher, by exploring the conditions under which he or she can support and contribute to establishing new ways of managing employment relations at local and inter-company level.

After having considered the action-researcher involved both as an institutional entrepreneur and translator of an inter-company regulation initiative, we will examine the opposite question: in what conditions can an institutional entrepreneur contribute to the production of scientific knowledge (Avenier, 2008)? Can he or she analyse an institutionalisation process in which he or she is a stakeholder? Can an institutional entrepreneur have sufficient critical detachment with regard to the analytical categories that have guided his action? How is it possible to analyse managerial artefacts that would not have existed without the action of the researcher now an institutional entrepreneur? The second part of our paper will then highlight the advantages of an abductive stance enabling the researcher to adopt the position of a contributor to producing knowledge. Through presentation of the conceptualisation generated (an analysis grid of compromises between flexibility and security), we will establish links with existing theoretical frameworks in order to emphasise the position of the institutional entrepreneur and establish our status of researchers.

Regulation practices emerging at local level...

We seized upon the opportunity of a research-action project funded according to Article 6 of the European Social Fund (ESF) for which we performed coordination to gain access to the emerging practices of reconciling flexibility and security as well as observing the process by which they become institutionalised. This project, named “Flexicurity”³, was aimed at testing the relevance of this approach for designing and implementing new compromises between flexibility and security at local level. Based on identifying and analysing existing methods⁴ of reconciling flexibility and security used at inter-company level in the three partner countries⁵, as well as identifying and analysing flexibility and security requirements of the stakeholders

³ www.flexicurity.org

⁴ Employer pools, umbrella company hiring, overtime banks, skill pooling, multiple job-holding, employment cooperatives, etc.; see the project web site for further information on these practices.

⁵ Belgium, France and the Netherlands

in the Liege and Lille employment pools on which we chose to focus our action, we⁶ ascertained the scope of demand for regulation. We spurred on and supported, in collaboration with the stakeholders on the labour markets of the areas concerned, various methods of reconciling flexibility and security that met with the requirements expressed by the players in the local economy. On the basis of these pilot projects, participatory work with all the partners in the project was carried out in order to come to agreement on a shared view of economically and socially responsible flexicurity and to pinpoint ways of making them operational and institutionalised.

Below we take a detailed look at two of these pilot projects conducted as part of the Flexicurity project. We will then use them to develop our response to the two questions at the heart of the matter in this paper. As a reminder, these questions are: 1) how can an action-researcher become an institutional entrepreneur; 2) how can this institutional entrepreneur contribute to the production of scientific knowledge, in this instance the subject of institutionalising compromises reconciling flexibility and security at inter-company level?

Pooling of qualified support personnel in small and medium sized businesses: Job'Ardent

These SMBs in Liege, active in a range of different sectors (metallurgy, energy, printing, IT, etc.) are permanently confronted with needs for qualified personnel to carry out the duties of graphic designer, sales secretary, quality specialist, etc. However, due to their small size, it is difficult for these companies to bear on their own the wage costs related to hiring full-time employees to fill these positions. Moreover, part-time positions are not sufficiently appealing to attract the people with the necessary expertise to these jobs. However, possessing such expertise in these fields would help these companies to improve their competitiveness and productivity.

In 2005, thanks an imitative lead by the local Chambers of Commerce and our research centre, these companies were able to express, assess and formalise their requirements in terms of labour for support functions. They were also able to meet other companies with similar or connected needs. This led to the gradual emergence of a desire to collaborate to find the solutions to these needs collectively. Thanks to the support offered by the Chambers of Commerce and our research centre, several of them decided to pool their resources to employ these workers together and share their skills according to needs. After having looked into different ways to make such sharing operational, the companies chose to create an inter-organisational structure in the form of a GIE, or Economic Interest Group (slightly different to the French concept of GE employer pools), called Job'Ardent.

This method of pooling aims to meet the specific need for flexibility whilst offering guarantees of security to employers and the workers employed within this framework. This way, the SMBs can stabilise a qualified workforce and enjoy the use of advanced skills, whilst the employees are offered open-ended full-time contracts thanks to pooling of resources. Furthermore, being confronted with different organisational contexts and having to handle this specific constraint enables these shared workers to develop specific skills. It also offers them the possibility of specialising for one of the companies using their labour or provides them with greater value in the jobs market.

The process, from the emergence of this need to the actual recruitment of the first employee by Job'Ardent in 2008, was by no means a short one. Defining needs, looking for similar companies, developing trust, withdrawal of certain partners, choosing organisational methods, setting up collaboration, enlarging the employers' pool, etc., are all steps in a process that helped to highlight the dynamics of creating and institutionalising practices. The unsatisfactory nature of the legal framework in Belgium concerning employers' pools meant that its members were forced to by-pass certain aspects of the law (in particular with regard to the type of personnel) in order for the compromise to work satisfactorily for all. The desire to extend and propagate the GE gave rise to lobbying from all the stakeholders, which is still currently in progress. Its first concrete effects (the removal of restrictions concerning the target publics) could soon come into force via the "opportunities" offered by the recovery plans that the Belgian government has sent up to combat the current economic crisis.

⁶ i.e. our research centre, LENTIC, as well as our research partners, the IAE in Lille (FR) and OSA at the University of Tilburg (NL), our trade union partners, the André Renard Foundation (FGTB, B) and Emergences (CGT, FR) as well as our "local labour market player" partners (companies, union delegates, chambers of commerce, employers' federations, training bodies, public authorities, etc.)

A flexible employment pool in professional transition: Periservices

These various companies of social purpose located in the Liege region and operating in the recycling, construction, green spaces sectors, etc., alone employ several hundred employees, of which many are trainees and workers on comeback contracts. This booming sector is also in the process of structuring itself. These companies have already attempted an initial pooling of interests as part of the 'Plan des Grandes Villes' initiative, which enabled them to observe that they shared problems and needs, especially with regard to managing human resources. They mainly concern the problem of being able to adapt the required workforce in accordance with the significant fluctuations in these companies' activities and on managing absenteeism amongst comeback workers. This absenteeism, all the more salient than in other sectors due to the especially difficult profile of the workers, deepens the problem of numerical flexibility facing these companies.

The classical tool of flexibility, namely temporary agency work, represents an almost untouchable solution for companies with a social purpose, whose financial equilibrium is based on a certain percentage of subsidised labour. This is why these social economy companies first examined the possibility of creating a socially based temporary work agency themselves to obtain the necessary temporary workforce. The trade unions present on the Boards of Directors in the partner companies vetoed this proposition, due to the belief that "the social economy should not encourage temporary agency work". As a result, the companies decided to investigate other options, in particular the principle of pooling personnel. An employers' pool type of scheme good indeed be a relevant way of solving problems in terms of managing the workforce, as well as a doubly efficient way.

On the one hand, pooling of personnel between social economy companies that are members of the partnership could help solve the problem of mobilising a temporary work force in a flexible manner involving little cost. Since these companies are active in various fields and work for different customers, it is very unlikely that they experience peaks of activity at the same time. Consequently, they could exchange their employees to make the working time of their workforce more profitable and thus avoid having to systematically resort to temporary agency workers, which would not however prevent them using them in a secondary manner, if necessary.

On the other hand, pooling of personnel between social economy companies could also represent a response to labour requirements expressed by commercial companies. It could concern both "conventional" services (i.e. the services that the social economy companies in question already provide to their customers) and demand for "new" services ("Periservices"). The development of the latter type of services is, in addition, encouraged by regional authorities in order to support the growth of the social economy sector.

Whilst the opportunity is clear, the terms of this partnership and pooling are much less so. The companies are competitors first and foremost, and even though cooperation exists, a pooling process requires the partnership already set up to be extended further, formalised and made sustainable. The partnership in question is far from being stabilised. On the contrary, it is a moving partnership, depending on the opportunities that present themselves and the loyalty of its members is second to their individual interests in the short term. Since the companies' main objective is the goal of survival, any possibility of an additional contract would be given priority in relation to developing the partnership, though the latter possesses greater added value in the long-term.

The needs expressed by these social economy entrepreneurs clearly share common ground with our own objectives regarding experimentation of innovative schemes to reconcile flexibility and security. The intermediation conducted by one of our "labour market stakeholder" partners led us to observe, from initial contact, that our respective expectations and expertise could be put to work together. Our research centre is therefore led to play a pivotal role in supporting this innovation process, alongside the project entrepreneur. Since its legitimacy is sometimes contested due to the several different caps worn, our role extends to include, at certain moments, that of the project entrepreneur.

How can an action-researcher become an entrepreneur-translator?

The aim of this section is to describe our transition from the status of action-researcher to that of institutional entrepreneur/translator. Firstly, we will explore the links that can be established between institutional entrepreneurship and the sociology of translation. We will then describe the processes implemented in our two cases using the incorporative framework

put forward by Leca *et al.* (2006). However, in order to retain clarity in this presentation, it should be pointed out that this description will be somewhat simplified. On the one hand, we will sequentially present a process that is in reality iterative, even circular. On the other hand, we will be focusing on our sole action of institutional entrepreneurship and translation, even though this process was dealt with collectively, by various different players who we shall only mention in passing. Such a short-cut is justified by the methodological objective of this paper, which does not so much as aim to describe an institutional process (an article will be presented on this subject at a later date, highlighting the institutional processes and third-party role in all their complexity) as to show how we were able to generate actionable generic knowledge (Avenier, 2008) based on the experience of various practitioners in the field: those with whom we collaborated as part of our research as well as the related pilot projects, and the role we assumed ourselves, switching from the position of an “external” researcher to that of a contributor fully involved in the process.

Institutional entrepreneurship and the sociology of translation

Following many works focusing on the creation of institutions through isomorphic processes (DiMaggio *et al.*, 1983) and their effects on behaviour, neo-institutionalist researchers gradually became interested in the processes underlying the emergence and development of new institutions (Tolbert *et al.*, 1996), giving rise in lines of thinking to the concept of “institutional change”. Within this framework, beyond the paradox of the “embedded agency” (Garud *et al.*, 2007), research work attempted to describe the strategies used by the stakeholders in these (proto-) institutions to modify existing institutions or create new ones, more suited to their own needs and interests. These players are described as “institutional entrepreneurs”, after de DiMaggio (1988). He held that new institutions emerge when organised players with the required resources – i.e. institutional entrepreneurs – identify in these institutions the opportunity to achieve the goals that are of importance to them. Research on institutional entrepreneurship focuses on the one hand on the identity of these players, through study of their social, moral and psychological characteristics. On the other hand, it analyses initiatives implemented by institutional entrepreneurs to bring their projects to fruition.

An institutional entrepreneur is someone who exploits opportunities stemming from external shocks, which destabilise the rules of a given institutional field or which demonstrate the need to structure new fields. The motivations of such players can be varied, ranging from ideological, ethical and moral considerations to individual interest (Anand & Watson, 2004; Beckert, 1999; Rao, 1998; Fligstein *et al.*, 1996; Wade-Benzoni *et al.*, 2002). Whether the institutional entrepreneur is an organisation or individual player, much attention is accorded to its position in the field, and opinions on this matter vary: some authors believe that a central position in the field is more favourable to institutional entrepreneurship (Zilber, 2002), insofar as it generally confers authority and support to such players (DiMaggio, 1988; 1991). Others observe that the players at the fringes of the organisational field (Leblebici *et al.*, 1991; Haveman *et al.*, 1997; Garud *et al.*, 2002), or at a junction between several of them (Phillips *et al.*, 2002; Rao *et al.* 2000) are more likely than others to play this role. However, all are in agreement in underlining that it is important that the institutional entrepreneur occupies the position of a subject (Bourdieu, 1980; Foucault, 1972). It is not the formal position within the organisational sphere that is important, but the one that the player occupies within the social network, i.e. that of an identity that is socially developed and legitimate for the other players in the field. In an organisational sphere, these positions of subject are limited in number, yet they provide their holders with certain advantages in terms of access to resources, communication channels means of outreach. Moreover, they strengthen the capacity

to creating links between diverse stakeholders in the sphere, enabling institutional entrepreneurs in subject position to establish broader legitimacy and mobilise resources that are sometimes rather scattered.

In addition to this “institutional” position, it is essential for the entrepreneurs to possess social qualities – empathy, assertiveness, etc. – in order to carry out the political and organisation work required for any institutionalisation process. According to Beckert (1999), it is also important that they are able to adopt a reflexive stance towards institutionalised practices. This reflexivity is the sine qua non of forward looking temporal awareness (Dorado, 2005; Seo *et al.*, 2002) to plan for and design alternative methods for these practices and future paths for action.

The action of the institutional entrepreneur can be used in various contexts. The opportunities of such an initiative, like its methods, will vary in accordance with the extent of heterogeneity and institutionalisation in organisational spheres (Dorado, 2005). Nevertheless, whether the sphere in which the institutional entrepreneur takes his or her place is emerging, mature or in crisis, the action of the entrepreneur always bears a political dimension. The entrepreneur will in fact to their utmost to identify the interests and means of authority of the different players in the field, pinpoint the political opportunities, establish themes and issues, as well as mobilise resources for their project. The major stake of this action resides in the ability to set up and maintain groups of stable agreements that incorporate the interests of the various stakeholders (Fligstein, 1997). The institutional entrepreneurship process in fact possesses two fundamental and inter-related facets: construction of coalitions and theorisation.

This theorisation involves establishing the issue at hand, through advancing chains of cause and effect and highlighting the consequences of the choices that are to be made (Greenwood *et al.*, 2002). Tolbert *et al.* (1996) identified two main tasks in the theorisation process: specifying “defects” within the field for which local innovation represents a “solution or treatment”, and justifying the innovation, presenting it as more appropriate than existing practices (Greenwood *et al.*, 2002). For Maguire *et al.* (2004), theorisation is based on two strategies: persuasive reasoning, which gives meaning to the new practices for many players and explicit negotiation via political tactics such as bargaining, negotiation and compromise. This is how new practices are adopted. If it is conducted correctly, this theorisation work encourages the adoption of new rules via laws and the enrolment of dominant players in a field (Rao *et al.*, 2003), inasmuch as the institutional project appears to be a coherent and appropriate response to the destabilisations of the existing field or to the requirements of the emerging field (Acquier *et al.*, 2006).

These tasks make up the main ingredients of a non-isomorphic process of change represented in different ways from one author to another (Powell *et al.*, 1991; Tolbert *et al.*, 1996; Greenwood *et al.*, 2002; Acquier *et al.*, 2006), putting greater emphasis on one stage or another of the process, depending on the specific contexts to which their work appeals. Two criticisms in particular are made against these visions of the institutionalisation process. On the one hand, they are too focused on the discursive dimensions of the process (Czarniawska *et al.*, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996) and as such neglect the material aspects of institutional entrepreneurship. Some authors indeed believe that the analysis of discourse only reveals one aspect of the process and deem that research should also take into consideration the concrete schemes implemented by institutional entrepreneurs (Fairclough, 2005; Lounsbury *et al.*, 2003; Leca *et al.*, 2006), because they play a vital role in structuring of the new field. On the other hand, through concentrating analysis on power relationships between a limited number

of central players, such works tend to neglect the dynamics of learning as well as the manner in which this knowledge is produced and fits into the scope of these concrete schemes (Hasselbladh *et al.*, 2000; Acquier *et al.*, 2006). Acquier *et al.* (2006) thus propose adopting a theory of enhanced collective action which would combine analysis of power relationships with consideration of the dynamics of know-how (Hatchuel, 2000; Townley, 1993).

In this way, the actor-network theory (Akrich *et al.*, 1988a; 1988b; Latour, 1993, 2003; Callon, 1986) is a useful way of filling the holes in neo-institutionalist theories, insofar as it places the emphasis on how the translators develop tools and schemes and organise heterogeneous networks of human and non-human elements to support institutional change and build “governmentality” of the field (Miller *et al.*, 1987). This sociological approach effectively sees the innovation process from a more collective and emerging viewpoint than the neo-institutionalist vision. Whilst it highlights the central role of the “translator”, this role differs from that of the “heroic” entrepreneur who bears the entire weight of the project on its shoulders; through a process of mobilisation, intersement and embodiment of the stakeholders, the translator will encourage the emergence of problem identification that is collectively validated, and build up a network to support the innovation process. This process with its overtly political tone involves clarifying the respective stakes and interests, embodiment of the stakeholders and formalisation of intermediaries who provide temporary stability to the network. The role of the translator is therefore essential, but here it is merely a cog in the collective strategic workings, characterised by many trials and errors with results that are always unpredictable.

These two theoretical currents are therefore very similar and complementary. Leca *et al.* (2006) propose to combine them through an incorporative framework that splits the translation process into six steps: decontextualisation, problematization, construction of an intersement system, embodiment, research for support from allies and stabilisation of the network. We will explain and mobilise this framework in the following section, in describing the institutional entrepreneurship work that we conducted in the two cases presented above.

From one status to the other: the third-party as an entrepreneur-translator

The action-research commissioned by the European Social Fund that we were in charge of placed us in the position of action-researcher from the beginning, inasmuch as it aimed to produce an analytical framework regarding reconciling flexibility and security based on experiments conducted at local level. We took on many different roles: initiating the project, mobilising the various research partners and stakeholders on the labour market, facilitating interactions within the working group and pilot projects, supplying methodological expertise, but also know-how in organisational, social, and legal terms, assessing processes implemented and taking charge of the various steps of formalisation that punctuated the three years of the project.

As recommended by Argyris (1970), our action was aimed at producing valid information, enabling the “system” to which we contributed to make the suitable and responsible choices and to ensure the sustainability of “desirable” compromises tied into the framework of the pilot projects. These different tasks demanded that a range of conditions be fulfilled in terms of legitimacy, composition of the partnership, involvement of the stakeholders, etc. (Pichault *et al.*, 2008).

Although these aspects were already respected upstream of the project, it soon came to light that the partners did not fully share the motivations of our research centre. Our centre's tradition of contribution to the labour market and in companies did not correspond to the position normally favoured by our researcher colleagues, who felt more comfortable and legitimate in a position of analyst, rather than in the role of "institutional entrepreneur". In the steering committee made up of researchers and trade union representatives, the project was immediately described as "far-fetched" – in particular the challenge was to *test a flexicurity scheme in two regions undergoing industrial re-conversion (the regions of Liege in Belgium and Nord-pas-de-Calais in France), via the creation of a platform for management and re-conversion of jobs in two logistic catchment areas*. Furthermore, at the project launch seminar, a significant part of the event was devoted, to our great disappointment, to searching for contingency plans. In the "local" working groups, named "territorial partnerships" and made up of local labour market stakeholders, a discrepancy became apparent in the extent to which the various players involved were committed. Whilst everyone recognised the relevance of the project in relation to their own concerns, not everyone was ready to concretely implicate themselves in the actions (and take the related "risks"): some soon withdrew (in our own region, the representatives from the local economic redeployment group and from a port company leading a network of logistics companies licensed on the port); others were not able to clearly ascertain how this project and their daily practices could interact (the representatives of a training body and the public employment bureau, as well as those from trade unions); others could be affected by the achievements of the project and attempted to direct it in a way that would be advantageous to them (the representatives of the companies, another trade union and the employers' federation in the temporary agency work sector). Lastly, in the field, mobilising players ready to innovate and finding partners that were uniform as well as representative or a sufficient critical mass of players to bring the planned schemes to fruition turned out to be long and arduous tasks.

The constraints of this project and its implementation were twofold for us: as researchers, we did not genuinely have stakes in terms of effective innovation on the labour market. Nevertheless, since we were responsible for achieving the project's goals, we had to produce recommendations on this subject and present them as learning and methodological tools for the stakeholders on the labour market at micro-economic level. It was therefore important that "things happened in the field", so that we could reflect upon them and elaborate our findings from concrete observations. In this way, it did not really matter whether these pilot projects were successes or failures – both finished and unfinished processes can provide interesting data – but maintaining the reputation of our centre as a contributor in business and on the labour market nonetheless forced us to generate some results and ensure the satisfaction of the partners (in terms of "return on investment").

In short, it soon became apparent to us that the attributes and responsibilities of the action-researcher would not be sufficient to achieve the objectives set, all the more so in light of the deadline imposed (two years initially, extended by several months). We therefore gradually assumed a more involved, dynamic and interventionist role that the assessment of our work in the field led us to describe as one of "institutional entrepreneur" and "translator", in light of the theoretical frameworks presented in the previous section. Below, we describe the institutional working methods that we used as part of this project, demonstrating in this way how we have evolved from one status to another. Our reasoning is based on the steps of institutionalisation proposed by Leca *et al.* (2006).

Decontextualisation

The methodology drawn up to perform our European project involved a first step of identification – in the three partner countries and their neighbours – and analysis of existing practices regarding reconciling flexibility and security at inter-company level. Our research assumed an abductive stance and in particular aimed to answer the following question: what is flexicurity practice at micro-economic level? Consequently, we decided to consider without preconceptions any compromise between flexibility and security, without seeking to be exhaustive. We wanted to avoid a blinkered standpoint that would stem from too a deductive dynamic preoccupied with wanting to test aspects established on assumption by the “theorists” of flexicurity. In fact, at local level there are many arrangements claiming to reconcile the needs of flexibility and security that do not necessarily bear the “flexicurity label”, but which potentially belong to this approach. Such being the case, they represent a potentially rich breeding ground from which we probably could draw a certain number of lessons as regards the methods of flexicurity and rendering it operational.

As a result, we identified and analysed various workforce pooling systems, applying the principle of personnel pooling in different ways: employer pools in France and Belgium (as well as employer pools – GE – designed to help re-entry into the labour force and qualification – GEIQ – in France), Dutch flex-pools and its German sister scheme, or even the Danish Flexviden (Flex Knowledge). We also focused our attention on various mechanisms based on the principle of personnel leasing: skill pooling (B), umbrella company hiring (F and B)⁷. We examined cooperative systems that enabled certain risks to be shared, such as job cooperatives. This inventory was by no means exhaustive, but it was to fuel the first stages of collective thinking concerning the principles of “desirable” flexicurity at local level and nourish the imagination of the stakeholders with regard to the methods of the pilot project(s) to be set up.

Our role as an institutional entrepreneur was already notable in the background during these first steps. We used schemes set up in other contexts as our inspiration and coordinated initial translation work enabling reinterpretation of original initiatives as “trans-local ideas” that correlate with the requirements identified in our work in the field. In the case of the Periservices process, the principles of workforce re-entry, qualification and pooling which act as a basis for the French GEIQ respond to the needs for flexibility and the mission objectives expressed by social economy companies. In the search for fields for experimentation, we set forth this “trans-local idea” congruently in relation to the opportunity that we perceive in this sector, emphasising its entrepreneurial and social, or even missionary character. This is then formalised in a proposal to support the collective initiative already in progress in the sector but blocked by its incapacity to envisage alternatives to “social temporary agency work” refused by the trade unions. Little by little, this idea is seen as relevant for the companies approached as partners.

The process leading to the creation of Job’Ardent started somewhat differently. The “trans-local” idea of pooling labour as part of an employers’ pool is drawn from French experience in this subject, but also from the Brussels-based project “JobIris”, the only successful and operative employers’ pool in Belgium. Our attempt to “embed” these ideas in our own local context did not reveal any already existing partnerships of companies to which we could attach ourselves. We therefore promoted this “trans-local” idea in the various professional circles willing to offer us the opportunity, as well as in various trade press reviews, by highlighting its qualities and its advantages for private companies: a purely private

⁷ For a description of these methods, see the www.flexicurity.org web site

partnership, facilitated and implemented at low cost, a scheme independent of public aid and its usual related constraints in terms of the supervisory power wielded by the authorities and administrative red tape, quality and flexibility of the workforce operating in such a framework, etc. Progressively, companies indicated their interest in this formula as well as their requirements, on which we reflect with them. We managed to form a partnership of three companies with similar and corresponding needs for the positions of graphic designer, creative consultant, quality expert and logistics expert. We then organised a first meeting between these firms.

Problematization

Once these “demands” emerged, the challenge was to exploit the opportunities that they presented. We had to legitimise our capacity to meet such a challenge and prove the advantages and relevance of the “trans-local ideas” we proposed to these local players. We identified the main stakeholders to be convinced in order for these ideas to become reality, and developed projects that we hoped would meet with their expectations. The aim of these projects was to formalise the issues and to present our solutions.

The leader of the collective initiative that gave rise to Periservices seemed to us to be the essential player who had to be convinced of the cogency of our proposition. The person in question, designated by many as the local “Mister social economy”, had already created, taken over and turned around several of the region’s social economy companies. Convinced that it was necessary for the sector to collaborate in order to survive and expand, he set up an initial partnership aiming to encourage interaction and promote itself to players outside the sector (GESS). He was also the coordinator of one of the sector’s consulting agencies; as such, the regional Minister in charge of the social economy gave him the responsibility of developing various projects in the region focused creating business based on pooling of “minor requirements” expressed by private companies (the Pericles project). Once the “flexicurity” needs of the sector’s companies had been identified, relayed by this entrepreneur, and after the likely constraints had been pinpointed, we set up a project that combined the various needs and opportunities in a coherent whole: a mixed partnership of social economy firms and private companies giving rise to an “employment structure” that was to make available to its members a pool of workers seeking to enter or re-enter the jobs market. Their career path would be guided and supported by an array of tools (job coaching, formalisation and validation of skills, etc.) and completed when these workers would be embedded in the partnership’s private companies. The latter could be called upon by social economy companies both to confront problems of absenteeism as well as to respond to activity peaks linked to the fluctuating demands of order-making private companies, or to the need for “minor services” related to pooling of the latter’s needs. This incorporative project appealed to the entrepreneur, who “killed two birds with one stone” and decided to propose the Pericles process to the partners and steering committee. This “solution” met with the enthusiasm of all the players and we were included in the initiative to provide guidance and expertise. Our proposal of a free project and intervention, as well as our reputation as a contributor from the university system, gave us a certain amount of legitimacy to carry out these tasks. Furthermore, our university background and the European project to which our action belonged meant that we were perceived as neutral, detached and equidistant, only concerned by ethical and social considerations. From then on, we were well accepted by the initial partners who also saw our presence as a way of tempering the eagerness of an entrepreneur with multiple aims and therefore with especially vested interests.

The problematization developed to obtain the commitment of companies to the pilot project involving creation of an employers' pool (the future Job'Ardent) targeted small but expanding businesses and underlined how advantageous it would be for them to benefit from the skills required to develop their activity and maintain its quality in a proportionate, qualitative flexible and fairly cost-free manner. We also highlighted the capacity of pooling personnel – and more specifically that of the employers' pool since it is the only framework which enables pooling to be carried out legally in Belgium – to satisfy these different expectations. This line of thinking seemed relevant to many companies and for a few of them, the employers' pool became THE solution to their problem, or in other words a “compulsory marker”.

Interessement

Recognising the legitimacy and relevancy of the issues identified is not sufficient to mobilise the players. As stated previously, mobilising the different partners is not an easy task and we had to pour effort into gaining their interest for the projects proposed. To convince the various players to participate, we had to explain how these projects would be of direct benefit to them.

In both cases, we underlined how the ideas put forward would enable an adequate response to the needs and expectations expressed. As regards Periservices, the GIE had the advantage of securing the respective activities, by clarifying and demarcating the core concerns of each player and by developing collective commercial activity, as well as also securing the supply of labour. The constraint was that these companies had to fulfil their mission better, by helping an increased number of workers enter or re-enter the labour market. Regarding Job'Ardent, the employer's pool was to secure company growth and quality of service through the use of pooled human resources, which in turn were less costly than temporary agency workers or sub-contractors.

Furthermore, we explained to potential partners that by participating in these pilot projects, they would be playing a pioneering role and would help to give their company/organisation an innovative aura beneficial from a wide range of standpoints. The partners in the Periservices scheme innovated by creating the first socially-themed GIE. The Job'Ardent partners also innovated by setting up one of the very first Belgian employers' pools, the first also to implement pooling of part-time skills and resources. It is sure that their audacious actions will gain publicity in various circles and, if successful, will provide them with many opportunities to speak about their venture and demonstrate that it is also at the forefront of progress socially.

The players in the Periservices partnership also autonomously and collectively defined the rules governing future collaborations within their sector. Given the importance of the stakes in terms of self-regulation of commercial practices, this is the best position to be in. It will perhaps be possible to influence development of rules to best serve individual interests... Furthermore, if the initiative works, Periservices will be recognised by the authorities as a legitimate and innovative “macro-player”, which could facilitate access to subsidies on which this type of company is very dependent.

Embodiement

Once this basis had been set down, it had to be consolidated. This involved translating it into a series of artefacts that give form to the problematization and to the expected feedback. It required strengthening of the framework of action to avoid challenging of its basis later down the line, as well as focusing of debate on the project methods.

The creation of various “intermediate elements” marked the two institutionalisation processes presented. The problematization that gave rise to Periservices was based on the presentation of the results of the diagnostic carried out by our research centre when it joined the partnership as an “academic support” partner. We collated the miscellaneous points of view and expectations, underlined the threats, opportunities, strong points and weak points of the process at the stage at which we became involved and listed the different possible scenarios visualised by the parties encountered as well as assessing them. This feedback, validated by the partners and disputed solely at the margins of the discussion, provided a stable working framework for continuing the project. The regulation scheme proposed was then represented in graphical form, clearly showing the various stakeholders and the type of links between them. This enabled a better grasp of the set goals. This diagram evolved throughout the process, in accordance with re-direction of the approach, but it helped maintain the logic of pooling as a fundamental element of the collaboration. Once the “final” partnership had been delimited and the objectives and methods accepted, the project was embodied by creation of the first socially-based GIE. In order to achieve this, articles of association and “internal regulations” were co-developed, formalised and signed. They met with the approval of the competent authorities and as a result the GIE was created. All that remained was to ensure that this structure did not resemble an empty shell and that effective collaborations could be created under its auspices. There was also the question of giving life to this new institution, to ensure that it became recognised as a relevant and legitimate player by its targets: its private company and public organisation customers. This involved developing a commercial message and a collective and coherent offer of services, which we helped to draw up through conducting various brain-storming sessions and strategic seminars. This message was to be broadcast mainly by the means of a web site dedicated to Periservices. The partners chose to entrust this task to a trainee, who unfortunately failed and abandoned the project. This setback, combined with the bankruptcy of one of the members, brought the initiative grinding to a halt.

The process of creating Job’Ardent was also punctuated with many intermediate elements. The “trans-local idea” was put across using a number of communication means: PowerPoint presentations in various circles, mass-mailing initiatives, articles in the press, etc. Reports were made on the various meetings of the “pioneers” and then validated by the partners. The respective needs were spelled out using customised analysis grids and the pooling scenarios designed on this basis were put into diagrammatic format as well. Creation of the GE also involved writing and signing articles of association and internal regulations, for which we submitted a first draft to discussions that we chaired. When the time came to recruit the first employee, we drafted a job description on the basis of the partners’ different demands, submitting it to them for validation. These various intermediate elements helped to build trust between the members of the network and subsequently enabled the first worker to be recruited.

Support from allies

These partners commitment and the adoption of various intermediate elements were not sufficient to “secure” the process. Not all the partners had fully grasped the problematization and assumed opportunist positions, “one foot in and one foot out”, waiting to see how the situation developed. It was therefore important to generate a maximum number of “supporters” for these projects. Our position as a subject within the local jobs market helped us in this task. Depending on the point of view and the scope considered, we were both a central player in the field, due to our academic status and our experience of contributing to a wide range of subjects within the field, but also a player “on the touchline”, because we

ourselves are not a company, therefore we do not have the same experiences, the same constraints or the same expectations. Our position as an interface with the public authorities (the European Commission and the regional authorities) allowed us moreover to create bridges between the players, leading notably to consolidation of the different stakeholders within the project steering committee.

This neutral and legitimate position, at the interface between different spheres, gradually placed us in the role of an institutional entrepreneur. If we consider the Periservices entrepreneur, “Mister social economy” had too vested interests (he is in fact a director of several partner companies...) to secure everybody’s implication. Of course, he was often able to lever action from many of the various stakeholders (local authorities, companies he is a director of or which he “turned around”, social economy consultancies, specialist investors, prestigious customers, etc.). However, he was not able to obtain the support of other players without delegating this task to a more “neutral” player. As a result, we assumed the responsibility of convincing the boards of directors of the partners firms, the major industrial players (potential customers) who were not amongst the contacts of the entrepreneur, the sector’s federations whose toes we risked treading on, the bodies responsible for upholding social laws, etc. Such acceptance were conveyed by the recognition of the GIE and its social purpose, the minutes of Board meetings, articles in the specialist trade press, etc. We also had to negotiate with other sectors, which forced us to reformulate the project: it was divided into steps, the commitments obtained were respected for a less ambitious initial phase and would be maintained or not following evaluation at the end of this first phase; the budget was refined, the financial risk was greatly scaled down for the partners and depended on granting of aid from the regional authorities; certain partners wanted to remain in a position of observer, to participate without fully involving themselves, a position that was rejected in the end by those who “dared” to move upward and onward. Indeed, they chose to carry on without such “timid” players. All these modifications evidently involved ongoing discussions with the various partners to validate these changes and adapt the intermediate elements.

In the case of Job’Ardent, from the start we assumed the role of institutional entrepreneur, in cooperation with the local Chambers of Commerce, because we ourselves were the project leader and were attempting to “sell” our “cause” to the companies. Building a uniform and complementary partnership was a long and difficult process, punctuated by the commitment then withdrawal of several partners, who either could not or would not wait for the project to be fulfilled to see their needs satisfied. In the end, our project was based on a single firm that believed in the project and displayed patience. This company is considered to be one of the flagships of the local economy. It is directed by an influential member of one of the main employers’ federations, who also has a significant presence in the world of business. This member echoed our discourse in these various circles and accepted to provide “testimonials” when asked. This gave legitimacy to our project, which was no longer perceived as an “academic fad that did not correspond to the reality in the field”. The presence of the local Chambers of Commerce alongside us also helped to confer upon our project qualities of entrepreneurship and efficiency. The project started to take shape on the basis of these two vocal supporters of our discourse.

Stabilising the network

Building the network is not the be all and end all of the matter: such a network must be given stability, sustainability and the capacity to resist to the different problems that it may encounter.

We failed to stabilise the Periservices network. Various elements could be incriminated: firstly, the failure of the trainee who was supposed to formalise the commercial message and broadcast it via the web site. Following this setback, no member took on the responsibility for this task, sitting on the fence with an unstable balance between the desire to succeed and that of minimum investment. Thereafter, one of the partner firms went bankrupt in dubious circumstances. It was said to have been one of the main beneficiaries of pooling. Its disappearance meant that the partnership no longer represented a sufficient critical mass to make pooling operational. Finally, and this element is probably capital, the project entrepreneur changed project! He received ESF funding to implement, in a given region, reinforced cooperation between the various players in the social and professional reintegration sector. As a result, he mothballed Periservices, because he intended to reproduce the same initiative in the region that he was responsible for (with the support of the local authorities who provided him with financial and human resources, the “life-line” which Periservices lacked) and get the partners of Periservices on board. The objective of this pooling has been deferred, to focus on other forms of exchanges and collaboration at a different territorial scale and with different partners (the new project includes a broader range of partners: public social aid centres, training bodies, support organisations, crèches, etc.). The main spokesperson of Periservices changed discourse and our position as an intermediary providing support but also as an entrepreneur prevents us from re-launching the initiative, notably for ethical reasons: we sought to stimulate the process in order to gather observable data, but we do not wish to “force” this process. Nonetheless, it seems that Periservices gained a legitimate identity and was perceived as an interesting innovation, because we have been contacted at various intervals by other players in the sector to assist them in reproducing the process in their own local contexts.

As regards the Job’Ardent network, it seems to have stabilised. It boasts a number of spokespersons: one of the firms at the root of the project, the Chambers of Commerce and ourselves. The collectively chosen name “Job’Ardent” gives this innovation a local identity and local roots (the main town in the employment catchment area in which we are operative is often spoken of in French under the name “Cité ardente”). The network is recognised as a macro-player by the authorities, giving it the necessary approval to function and recruit employees. A first employee has been hired, switching the project from the experimental phase to the managerial stage, because employees are not “guinea pigs” on whom we experiment! The success of the project has generated confidence, even if its reach is sensitive, and we have been contacted by other companies – either directly or via the other spokespersons – wishing to join the partnership or create one themselves. As a result, the partnership is expanding, strengthening its base and sustainability: to date, almost one year after its official launch, the GE has moved on from 5 to 8 members and is in the process of recruiting another employee.

It can be seen, through the description of these different stages, that the action-research framework forces the researcher to abandon his or her (theoretical) stance of external observer in order to assume a more active role, which can be classed as institutional entrepreneurship and translation. Although we first placed ourselves in the position of institutional entrepreneur, in order to launch an initiative and attempt to mobilise for and convince people of our objective and vision, we then went on to favour the role of translator, inasmuch as it placed us in a more “elevated” position, allowing us to become a stakeholder “like the others” in a collective process with more random results. These results did not correspond exactly

with what we initially expected. However, we are not evaluating them in terms of the success or failure of social innovation. Instead, the prime concern is the production of new knowledge in terms of institutionalising compromises between flexibility and security in inter-company partnerships.

Can institutional entrepreneurs theorise their own efforts at institutionalisation?

Previously, we stated that the objective of our research was to identify the conditions in which institutionalisation of sustainable compromises between the needs for flexibility and security within inter-company partnerships take place. We would like to develop this knowledge using the experience of players in the field as a basis, by focusing our thinking on their concrete practices and by co-developing this knowledge with the stakeholders of such practices. As such, we have obtained local knowledge, to which now a generic character must be conferred (Avenier, 2007). This is the aim of this section, in which we describe the abductive process implemented to give this knowledge scientific status.

Our work is part of a constructivist (Von Glaserfeld, 1995; Le Moigne, 1995) and abductive perspective which takes as its basis the representations put forth by the stakeholders on the local labour market in terms of compromises between flexibility and security, focusing on their experience and assessment of identified existing practices and experiments conducted in their company. The choice of this stance soon became self-evident insofar as there is no satisfactory pre-established theoretical framework that we could have tested in the field. Furthermore, a positivist and deductive approach would have confined us to the task of verification, whereas we want to explore the innovations emerging on the local jobs market. The sample used for our conceptualisation work may be described as a “sample of congruence”: indeed, the “choices” made for our work in the field were somewhat opportunistic (Bryman, 1988). We did not have any preconceptions concerning the breeding ground conducive to the emergence of this type of social innovation at inter-company level. We therefore set off in several directions, we involved ourselves, attempted to convince the players to implement new ways of reconciling their own needs for flexibility and security with those of their employees. We anchored our analysis in the set of institutional processes to which we had access, whether or not they were described as “economically and socially responsible flexicurity” by the stakeholders on the employment market with whom we were cooperating. Our view was that both successes and failures could help us to pinpoint the reality “on the ground”.

On the basis of different compromises reconciling flexibility and security that we were able to observe (of which two examples were presented at the beginning of this paper), we firstly co-developed knowledge that was localised, historical and demonstrative of the power relationships affecting the interactions within the partnership. The descriptive categories stemming from this co-development work are in fact influenced by the cognitive capacities, origins and spheres of competence and intervention specific to the various parties to the process, including ourselves. As such, the employees emphasised the informal, personal, optional and modifiable nature of the arrangements, whereas their representatives focused in particular on their scope and methods of application as well as on related systems for regulating them. The management of the firms concerned focused the debate on respecting the distinctive nature of the respective requirements for flexibility and security, as well as on the voluntary commitment of the different parties to the process of innovation. They also

emphasised the cyclical nature of these needs and underlined the usefulness of flexible practices. Amongst the other stakeholders, it can be noted, for example, that the representatives of the public authorities were attentive to the formal nature of the agreements and their incorporation into social regulation that already existed. As regards the different local authorities involved in the process, they gave special attention to the players involved in the process of drawing up the compromise, as well as to the intervention of third-party contributors to ensure overall coordination and the smooth running of the project.

We also played a role in the theorisation process by contributing our own set of concepts and mobilising them through the development of an analysis grid identifying the compromises observed. This does not represent methodological bias. On the contrary, it is a vital step in any scientific process. The numerous cross-overs between the empirical and theoretical construction, throughout the institutional process and its assessment by its stakeholders, enabled a descriptive grid to be drawn up whose different categories were continually subject to validation by the partners and to tests in the field. This grid, which possesses up to twenty variables, was gradually refined and resulted in the tool presented in the table below.

VARIABLE	DESCRIPTION
Deliberate / Emerging	Voluntary negotiation, with explicit reference to requirements expressed and accepted by the stakeholders vs. gradual or iterative adjustments, with reference to requirements that appear as time goes by.
Two-side Acceptance	Extent of respect for the principle of voluntary commitment to the implementation of the compromise for each stakeholder.
Inclusive / Selective	Involvement of all the stakeholders in the employment relationship at all stages of the process leading to the compromise vs. reduced and/or selective involvement.
With / Without intervention of a third party	Level and modes of participation of a third party in the process of designing the compromise (advice, cognitive supervision, mobilisation, guidance, regulation) and in its governance.
Generic / Specific	Uniform application to all members of one of the groups that is a party to the negotiations vs. compromise satisfying specific issues expressed by an individual or restricted group.
Evolutionary / Static	Possibility to adapt and enrich the compromise throughout its existence vs. rigidity of the compromise negotiated.
Formalized / Informal	Compromise based on an official agreement between stakeholders (explicit, documented, accessible) vs. informal agreement.
Regulation mode	Existence or not of a system for controlling and penalising, linked to the compromise (cultural norms, interdependence of the partners, collective bargaining agreements, laws and regulations).
Consistent / Inconsistent	Consistency of the content of the compromise with existing regulation at higher levels.

The stake of our research was therefore to give this locally actionable knowledge a generic character, i.e. one that is abstract and de-contextualised. This quest for legitimacy does not mean that our variables are rules that are to be applied universally and mechanically, but that they must be considered to be heuristic guidelines that should be re-contextualised to take into consideration the characteristics of each compromise. Their purpose is to question, to highlight and to stimulate both researchers and players in the field (Avenier, 2008). An

abductive process is used to confer this generic character, enabling links to be established with the categories proposed by various theoretical frameworks, to give legitimacy to the formalisation stemming from debates between “practitioners” of these compromises and the “researcher-entrepreneurs”. Our role was therefore to assign the emerging categories to existing scientific fields, giving the theorisation validity that is at the same time empirical, scientific and social, a proof of its institutionalisation.

If we consider the variables proposed, it can be observed that this analysis grid is essentially at the heart of 3 theoretical currents: the theorisation that we put forward in fact refers to neo-institutionalist approaches, as well as to the theories of innovation and inter-company cooperation.

Neo-institutionalist theories emphasise various dimensions of the (re-)institutionalisation process to which several of our variables refer. As such, our interest for the third party player, whose identity and methods of action can vary but whose presence is essential for negotiating “desirable” flexicurity compromises is confirmed by the research current focusing on institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio, 1988), the main aspects of which we have presented in this paper. This entrepreneur displays many characteristics of the third party player and moreover neo-institutionalist research shows that the position at the junction between different organisational and/or institutional fields reinforces the capacity of the entrepreneur to carry out institutionalisation (Phillips *et al.*, 2002; Rao *et al.* 2000). Furthermore, Powell *et al.* (1991) indicate the importance of implementing governance systems to complete and stabilise the process of institutionalisation. This corresponds with our “regulation mode” category, which underlines the necessity to clarify the “rules of the game” and to put in place from the start systems for controlling and penalising based on this rules. The stress that we place on formalising compromises also corresponds to the material dimension of theorisation, essential for the success of a process and which is conveyed by the generation of various artefacts that strengthen the institution whose creation is in progress (Leca *et al.*, 2006).

This concept of formalisation is also central to the theories of innovation, in particular the actor-network theory (Akrich *et al.*, 1988a ;1988b), through the concept of “intermediate elements”, which designates in a similar way the material artefacts that allow us to reduce complexity, stabilise promote innovation. Furthermore, this theoretical current again also underlines the importance of third party involvement, by means of the “translator”, an actor (or rather actant) central to the sociology of translation. This function, which can be divided between several actants, displays the same characteristics as our “intervention of a third party” category. As regards our variable of inclusiveness, it is also validated through the steps of identification, mobilisation and embodiment of the players who are considered as essential parts of the translation process of underlying innovation.

Insofar as they identify the norms of reciprocity and reputation as essential mechanisms in resolving conflicts in inter-company partnerships (Ouchi, 1980; Froehlicher, 1999), the theories of inter-company cooperation also highlight the importance of the third-party in compensating the incompleteness of pure merchant logic (Orléan, 1994). The challenge is to create the conditions in which trust can be established between the players, so that they make deliberate and voluntary commitments – as proposed in our categories – in these new collaborative mechanisms. Moreover, these theories show that these relational measures (Lepers, 2003), implemented in tandem or not to traditional contractual instruments, make it possible to ensure the scalability required of arrangements in this context of needs and constraints that are constantly changing.

It should again be underlined that this conceptual research is not conducted in a linear and unique fashion, seeking validation of the theory in the field. On the contrary this process has encountered many different directions, aiming to confirm concepts that are in the process of being elaborated. In this perspective, it is possible that the categories stemming from practices and conceptual categories may have crossed, “pollinated” each other and, finally, enriched the respective fields of practice and theory.

The “Two side acceptance” category, for example, stems from one of the compromises studied, “Homme & Emploi”⁸: it describes one of the rules formulated to supervise the implementation of the scheme, stipulating that all the parties concerned by possible secondment of workers within H&E must be free to commit to the procedure or not (it could even be considered to be three or four side acceptance, if the employer and his or her legal employer are considered alongside the labour representatives and/or the management of H&E). The necessary respect of this condition in the institutionalisation process gained rapid agreement from all the members of the partnership (made up of stakeholders on the local employment market) and enabled attainment of acquired knowledge of the sociology of managerial action (Courpasson, 1997). However, the debates concerning this variable highlighted the limits of this condition, by raising the issue of alienation of players and arguing for the implementation of safeguards enabling this type of decision to be taken by each party in full knowledge of the respective stakes and interests, in both the short and long-term. It appeared that one of these safeguards can be the presence of a third party, capable of encouraging the various stakeholders to reflect on their positions and ideas. This observation allowed the practice of players in the field and the resulting theorisation to be re-examined and enriched.

The same can be said for the deliberate/emerging category. Predominant theorisation in terms of flexicurity indicates that this is a deliberate strategy using new practices of flexibility and security in an anticipatory and synchronic manner. It is these elements that guarantee its “win-win” aspect. However, when common sense is confronted with the reality in the field, it can be observed that reactive and emerging practices can also be described as economically and socially desirable flexicurity, preserving the general interest. It is therefore advisable to broaden the conceptual framework of flexicurity to incorporate these realities and concurrently to incorporate emerging practices into our field work (Mintzberg & Waters, 1982).

A similar line of thinking was evident with regard to the generic/specific category. In this last example, we observed that the *ad hoc* schemes, custom-designed to answer specific issues for certain workers or certain firms (skill pooling, multiple job holding, personnel pooling, etc.) can be considered to be desirable by their stakeholders. In several of our cases, the employees, like their employers, argued in favour of modifiable, adapted and optional arrangements. Nevertheless, the partner trade unions are worried that this might see an increase in the practices of individualisation and positive discrimination, which are beneficial to certain (groups of) workers, but detrimental for the collective. They thus argue in favour of generic compromises, underlining that it is especially important for the framework to be agreed upon and formalised collectively (ref.). Reflection on this matter led our working group to observe shortcomings in practices: the schemes, described as economically and socially responsible

⁸ “Homme & Emploi”, a scheme implemented by ArcelorMittal on its site in Liege to secure the transition of workers who could not be retrained towards early retirement; see Deflandre et Xhaufclair (2007)

insofar as they are in keeping with the various co-developed categories, cannot be embedded in other levels of social regulation. Despite their qualities, they are implemented in a legal no-man's land, or are even illegal. This observation thus pushed us to enhance how we conceptualised the issue of consistency, which examines the coherence of compromises made between the players with other levels of regulation (ref.).

These various illustrations of the abductive process which guided our conceptual work demonstrates how, from the very start of its creation, through the numerous confrontations of in the field reality and theory, our grid manages to fulfil the different roles that we assigned to it. In fact, it allows both description of the process of institutionalisation of these new social regulation compromises and specification of the action to be taken by players on the labour market responsible for negotiating compromises that preserve the general interest.

Conclusion

Having observed that traditional modes of social regulation are obsolete and therefore progressively incapable of supervising new work situations, current research on these subjects build upon negotiation of new compromises between the needs of flexibility and security of the stakeholders in the world of work, to enable the latter to interact in a satisfactory, balanced and durable manner, consistent with the constraints to which they are now confronted on a daily basis. The local, micro-economic level – i.e. that of the company, the partnership of companies, the employment catchment area, the region – is increasingly considered as a favourable breeding ground for the emergence of these new compromises. It allows institutional inventions to be anchored in social practices (Laville, 2002), and to ensure that they are more consistent with the requirements of economic players.

Within this framework, we examined the conditions under which institutionalisation of new forms of compromises between flexibility and security at inter-company level take place. To answer this question, we observed and analysed flexicurity practices implemented within this sphere. We identified a series of practices and, in particular, we stimulated and supported several of these processes, contributing, where necessary, to the emergence of “social innovations” that fuelled our thinking. We often went beyond the confines of the action-researcher role to become genuine institutional entrepreneurs, project entrepreneurs and translators of innovations under development. The analysis grid built on this basis, in collaboration with our local employment market stakeholder partners, represents an interesting generation of an intermediate element, which can be used by these same players when they are confronted with the issue of flexicurity in their day-to-day practices.

But the main methodological stake of our research was to confer a transferable character to this local knowledge, so that this heuristic grid may be legitimate for our fellow researchers, so that it may offer them markers and guides to stimulate their thinking, imagination and creativity. The scientific community is in fact a significant stakeholder in the process of recasting social regulation. By means of an abductive process, we thus attempted to demonstrate links between the theorisation that we put forward and the already existing knowledge in the scientific field. Our analysis variables are reminiscent of several theoretical currents – notably the theories of neo-institutionalism, innovation and inter-company cooperation. We believe that this augurs well for the scientific legitimacy of our work, even if we were not able to systematically establish these relationships in this paper. Under these conditions, these analytical categories can both offer guidance for action to players on the labour market and a framework for reflection to researchers interested by this issue.

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