

Does work kill in the country of 35-hour week?

October 6 2009, by Emma Charlton

Short work weeks, enviably long lunches and vacations their American or Japanese counterparts can only dream of: French labour conditions are well-known to be among the most generous in the world.

But a string of suicides at [France Telecom](#) has cast the spotlight on a darker side of French corporate life, where high stress and fraught relations with management drive many workers into [depression](#).

Statistically, it is not clear whether the 24 suicides and 14 attempted suicides at the former state-owned giant these past 20 months are significant.

But for Jean-Claude Delgenes, whose consultancy Technologia is advising France Telecom following the deaths, they are "a symptom of a wider pollution" in French corporate culture.

"A lot of people identify with the France Telecom case," he said.

The group, which trades internationally as Orange, has undergone major restructuring as it opens up to competition, which unions say has left workers stressed and demoralised.

Thirty-two-year-old Stephanie e-mailed her father moments before jumping from her fourth floor window at the firm last month, saying: "I can't accept the new reorganisation in my department. I'm getting a new boss and I'd rather die."

"It happened when they told me I was good for nothing," said Yonnel Dervin, a 49-year-old telecoms technician who survived after stabbing himself in the stomach in a meeting last month. "I couldn't take any more."

As France shifts from a paternalist corporate culture to a flexible, market-driven one -- symbolised by an invasion of US-style jargon such as "le deadline" or "le benchmarking" -- workers are being left by the roadside.

"You only have to look outside France to realise there are happier places to work," Thomas Philippon, a French economist at New York's Stern business school said, in an interview published this week.

"In France there is a suspicion between hierarchical levels that does not exist elsewhere, or nowhere near as much."

An annual survey on the quality of worker-management relations in more than 50 countries, carried out by the Swiss business school IMD, regularly rates France in the bottom five.

One reason for this, Delgenes argues, is that France's system for recruiting managers, with a caste of business school graduates parachuted in at the top of companies -- has led to a top-down, authoritarian management style.

"Compared to Germany, where you have managers who know a company from the inside, the training of our managers is deeply elitist," argued Delgenes.

He cites the case of one French corporation, which had a canteen for senior management and another for common workers -- a sure source of friction in a country with a tradition of republican equality.

Add to this a deep mistrust between business leaders, unions and the French state, dating back to the social struggles of the 19th century, and you have the ingredients for a corporate nightmare, Philippon argues.

A TNS Sofres study published in the *Nouvel Observateur* magazine this week showed only one third of French workers feel well informed about goings-on at their firm -- compared to two thirds of Americans.

Asked how they felt about their firm, one third said "disappointed", "suspicious" and "weary" -- much higher than in Germany or the United States.

Most of the France Telecom suicides were lifelong civil servants struggling to adapt to a new market-orientated culture.

But suicides have also hit other large French groups, from carmakers Renault and Peugeot to energy giant Electricite de France, raising questions over whether bosses are driving their employees too hard.

Despite a statutory 35-hour working week, many French actually toil much longer with an hourly productivity that is among the highest in the developed world, according to the OECD.

While repetitive strain injuries are on the decline in Britain and the United States, in France they have been multiplied by four in a decade.

To make matters worse, high unemployment and rigid hiring and firing practices mean French workers are less likely to leave an unhappy but safe job.

"People rarely move between companies, and the place of the public sector is traditionally strong. People are attached to their home region and job postings are usually enforced, rarely sought after," Delgenes

said.

France has one of the highest suicide rates among the world's leading economies -- at 17.6 per 100,000 compared to 13 in neighbouring Germany, 11 in the United States and 6.7 in Britain, according to World Health organisation figures for 2005. Only Japan is higher at 24.2 per 100,000.

Officially, just under five percent of all French suicides are work-related. According to Delgenes, the real figure is much higher, especially at a time of economic crisis.

"People are moved to jobs they are not properly trained for, so they make mistakes, and little by little they are marked as black sheep. They are pushed into a situation of failure."

Delgenes says France has a poor record on retraining people who lose their jobs in a lay-off plan. "That is a high-risk factor because people stay stuck in miserable situations."

The annual rate of [suicide](#) at France Telecom, at 16 per 100,000 people, is roughly the same as the general French population.

Looked at more closely, however, it is less than half the rate of 40 per 100,000 found among 45- to 55-year-old men, who make up most of the deaths.

And yet a disproportionate number killed themselves at their workplace or left letters blaming work for their despair, most recently a father of two who jumped from a highway overpass last week.

Bowing to pressure from public opinion, France Telecom's deputy chief executive Louis-Pierre Wenes, architect of the modernisation drive

blamed for the suicides, resigned on Monday.

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