



Workplace suicides spark French outcry

By Peggy Hollinger and Ben Hall in Paris

Published: September 19 2009 03:00 |

A few minutes before she threw herself out of her fourth floor office window, 32-year-old Stephanie sent her father an e-mail. "I have decided to kill myself tonight. . . . I can't take the new reorganisation. . . . I prefer to die," she wrote.

Stephanie had been with France Telecom nine years and, after a few ups and downs, was last June posted to the client accounts department in a well-heeled Paris neighbourhood. There she hoped for a new start, according to her father, Guy, interviewed in Paris Match magazine this week. But another wave of restructuring meant another change, and on Friday, September 11, the former law student decided she could no longer cope.

Stephanie's death has sent a shockwave through the telecoms group's 104,000 French employees. Hers was the 23rd suicide in 18 months. Others also blamed pressure at work.

Two days before, Yonnel Dervin, a telecoms engineer aged 49, stabbed himself in the stomach at an office meeting in Troyes, eastern France. He survived and said his act had been "premeditated and organised to denounce" working conditions inside the company, which has seen 22,000 job cuts in three years.

Their stories have triggered a national outcry and prompted questions about working practices at France Telecom as it adapts to intense competition. The former monopoly is an institution in France, 65 per cent of its staff still civil servants and its global success a source of pride after flirting with bankruptcy a few years ago.

Didier Lombard, chief executive, was hauled into the labour ministry to explain himself after news of Stephanie's death broke.

The suicide crisis has raised deep concerns over whether companies are driving their employees too hard in their efforts to boost productivity, in a labour market burdened by rigid working practices and high social charges. Renault, Peugeot, Airbus and EDF have all also suffered similar problems in recent years.

Answers will not come easy. Reliable figures for work-related suicide are almost non-existent. Estimates put the number at 300-500 a year out of 10,400 suicides recorded annually in France, which the government believes could be up to 20 per cent higher.

France has one of the highest suicide rates in western Europe, with 2.1 per 10,000, ranking second behind Finland and more than double the UK or Greece. Looked at from this angle, the rate of suicides at France Telecom could be below the national average.

Nonetheless, researchers believe the proportion of work-related suicides could be rising. Christophe Dejours, professor at the Conservatoire des Arts and Métiers and author of a book on suicide at work, says workplace suicides were largely limited to the agricultural sector until the 1990s. Today they occur across “very different social sectors from hospitals to school, construction, the electronics industry, banking”. Jean-Claude Delgenes, head of Technologia, a consultancy called in to advise France Telecom and its unions on the suicides, says new technology has contributed to a climate of isolation in today’s companies. “The activities of every employee can be controlled. The methods of evaluation are too individual. The person is isolated from the collective and when you isolate people you make them fragile.”

He also blames France’s elite system of management – where the graduates of an exclusive group of schools are promoted straight into top jobs. “The cult of the elite creates an authoritarian caste. We do not have real managers,” he says.

Employees at France Telecom share Mr Delgenes’ analysis. Christian Pigeon, a technician and representative of the SUD union, says years of restructuring have taken their toll, leaving workers feeling “isolated and worthless”.

Christian Mathorel, a CGT union delegate, blames a clash between a new managerial class and the company’s long-standing tradition of public service.

“The current management don’t know this company. They come in with their own ideas and methods. But this company has a history.”

France Telecom refused to comment. But in interviews in the French press this week in response to the crisis Mr Lombard appeared to reject this analysis. “I was born at France Telecom,” he told Le Figaro newspaper, citing his 42 years at the group. He has suspended all staff transfers and launched measures to support fragile employees while an independent report and action plan is prepared. But Mr Lombard has also stressed that in the face of intense competition, the company cannot stand still. It had, at least, not resorted to mass sackings as have competitors in other countries.

“France Telecom made a radically different choice – to keep everyone. This choice also explains why we meet setbacks. The path we have taken is the most difficult,” he told Le Figaro.