

# Talent Strategy

Covid-19

Re-starting the Engines  
in the Heart of Europe  
The View From  
HR Strategists in Belgium

By  
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**Amrop**

Leaders For What's Next

# Covid-19 - Re-starting the Engines in the Heart of Europe | The View From HR Strategists in Belgium

**On March 16, Belgium took an unprecedented decision in light of the coronavirus: an almost-total business lockdown. Belgium is now bracing itself for the next chapter: re-starting the engines.**

This business lockdown and re-start dynamic will present a considerable challenge for a small but significant country that is home not only to a flourishing international business community, but to NATO and the European Union. Belgium, like all nations who have installed drastic COVID-19 measures, will be operating without a manual. Its businesses have neither a well-rehearsed script, nor a set of user-ready best practices.

Meanwhile, the true impact of COVID-19 not only on the health of individuals, but on whole economies, is becoming starkly clear.

## No Back to Normal

Amrop spoke with 30 HR strategists to find out how they view the situation; both in general, and in specific terms. One thing is clear, *there will be no "back to normal"*. In the early days of coronavirus, the emphasis was mainly on taking measures to guarantee employee health and safety. In the coming period, significant efforts will be needed to develop a new work framework. One that allows business activity to be resumed in an economically tough environment, in a way that takes care not only of operating efficiency, but of human well-being.

The lockdown has so far driven 1,260,000 Belgian citizens into unemployment. Temporary Government unemployment measures have spared the country a wholesale panic reaction, since purchasing power has been largely preserved. But the measures have also had a masking effect: it is likely that not everyone is fully aware of the scale of the crisis that will hit once companies re-open their doors and employees are faced with a lack of work on arrival. To protect all parties, temporary government unemployment measures will need extending. But what will be the picture for organizations, and what can they do?

Belgium, with its population of 11.6 million and a strategic position at the heart of Europe, is no exception to the global rule. A health epidemic resulting in a deep economic crisis has not been seen in its recent history. Crises, so far this century, have been the stuff of economists.

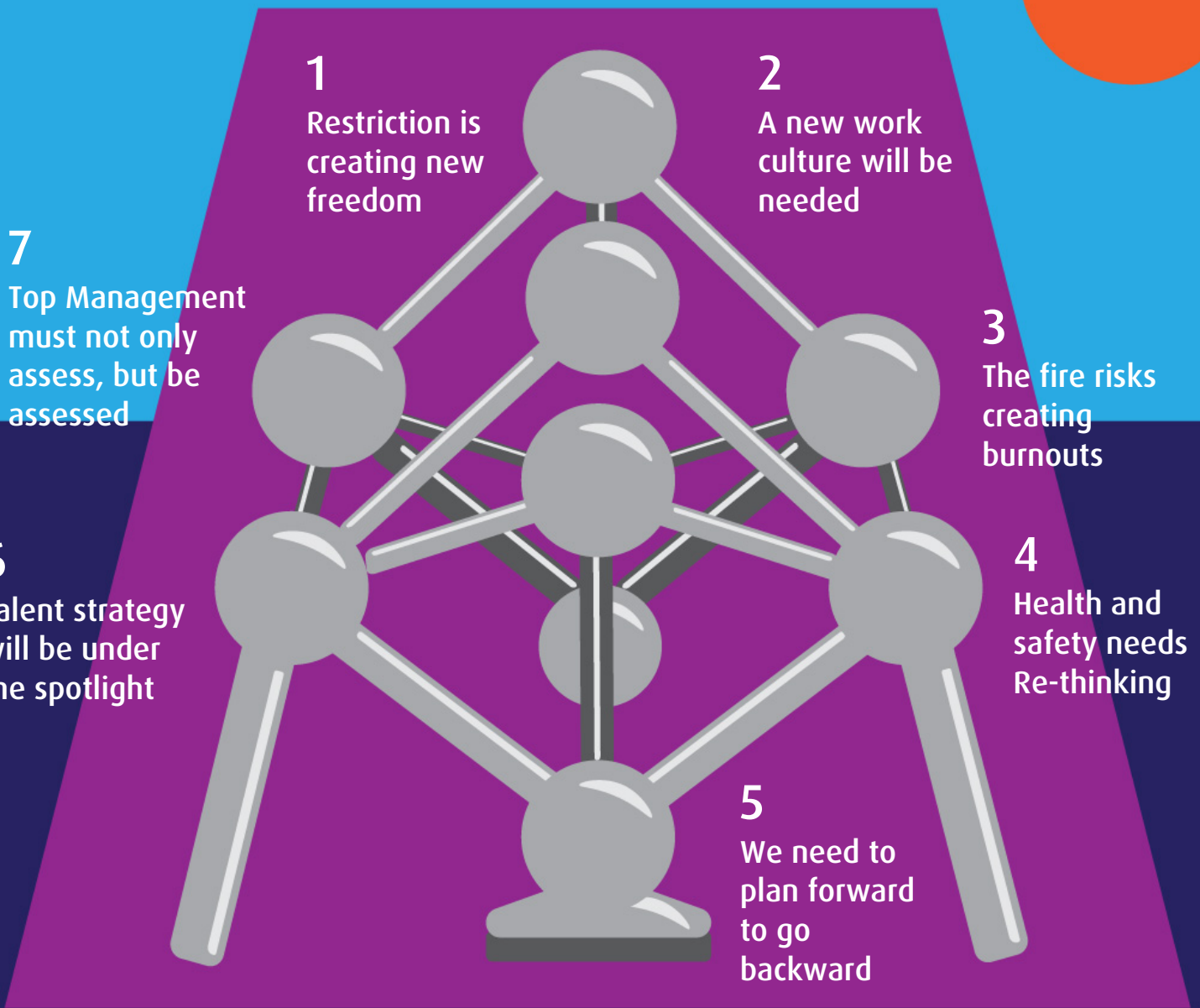
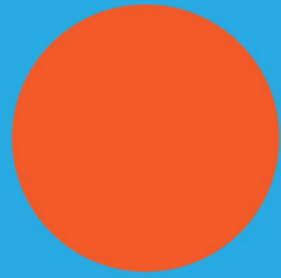
But the tentacular impact of coronavirus means that a balance will now have to be found between health, economy, and well-being.

**In this uncharted territory, HR strategists will play a pivotal role. Not only as firefighters, but in restoring new growth, paving the way for new opportunities: new ways of working and indeed, entire new working regimes.**

**All have the potential to lead to a better win-win for organizations and employees.**

# Re-starting the Engines In the Heart of Europe

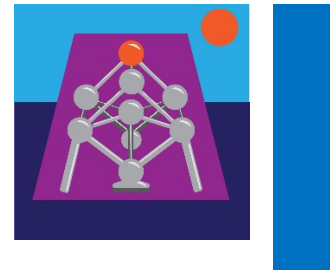
## 7 Keys from Belgium's HR Strategists



## 1 Restriction is creating new freedom

Those who worked through the lockdown have had to perform their functions differently so as not to endanger their personal health.

Homeworking has now become the norm for many. This is seen as a positive evolution, at least in these early stages, and mainly for practical reasons. Benefits include time gains, the possibility to better plan daily schedules, (increasing people's sense of autonomy), more contact with family members and an improved balance between work and social lives, as well as environmental and other sustainability gains. One surprising experience is that digital tools are enabling people to communicate successfully and indeed, better than expected. As one outcome, digital contact will likely increase going forward, with physical movement reduced to the bare essentials. This will have a major impact on the mechanics of hiring, also cross-border, and on people's motivation. Whether the impact will be positive or not remains to be seen.



Ongoing reduction of physical movement will likely have a major impact on hiring, and people's motivation.

## 2 A new work culture will be needed

A re-interpretation of work flexibility will be called for in terms of time deployment, presence and relationships with colleagues.

A balance will have to be struck between personal work planning and running the business efficiently and profitably. It's not yet clear whether homeworking supports this. Nor whether digital interaction can sustainably match its physical equivalents in terms of smooth working relationships between colleagues, good connectivity with customers, or successful project management. A clear framework will need to set out exactly what employers expect of employees, and follow-up. The partial loss of face-to-face contact with a direct boss will likely result in the need for more intensive online or telephone communication. Not only to discuss objectives, but to focus on how they will be attained. One question will be: how to replicate the informal coffee corner discussions that spark team-bonding and creativity?

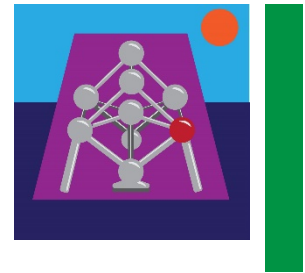


One question will be how to deal with topics normally covered in the coffee corner, informal discussions that can spark bonding and creativity?

### 3 The fire risks causing burnouts

Keen attention will have to be paid to well-being measures to ensure that the new work situation runs smoothly.

In addition to the benefits discovered in recent weeks, there are a number of red flags. For example, the homeworking/childcare combination is compromising the effectiveness of many people. Having to work in a confined domestic space with others is leading to symptoms of stress. The danger of burnouts is imminent. The government will need to ensure the parallel opening of companies, schools and nurseries to avoid further increasing the pressure on employees and a decrease in the quality of the work delivered, as well as additional leaves of absence. What's more, predominantly working from home can undermine motivation, due to a lack of follow-up and stimulation by colleagues and management, a lack of the right working resources, such as a well-functioning WiFi, high-quality headphones, or a comfortable workplace free of noise disturbance (particularly important for online calls).

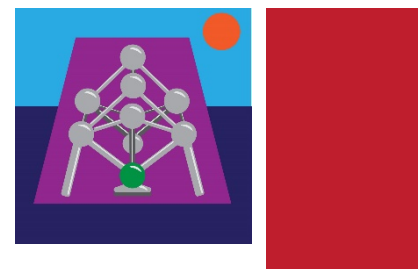


Predominantly working from home can lead to a decrease in motivation due to a lack of follow-up and stimulation by colleagues and management.

### 4 Health and safety needs re-thinking

Employees want to get back to work. Not only because they enjoy their jobs, but for financial reasons. However, they will step into a strictly regulated world.

Educating employees with the discipline to respect protective measures such as hygiene and social distancing will require clear policy. Employee feedback shows that connections with colleagues — also personal - are an important motivator to come into the office. When they do, they'll be confronted by security measures limiting the number of people in their office buildings. Today, it's believed that employees will spend only 30% of their time in the office. So it'll be important to find ways for colleagues to meet critical counterparts in person. In commercial functions, rules limiting customer visits to the strictly necessary will continue to be in force. Consultants who work on-site with clients must receive guarantees of a safe working environment. A large part of assignments are



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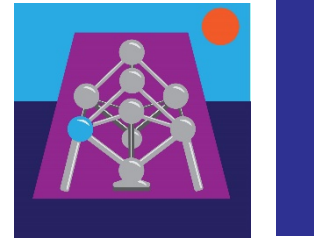
executed remotely today. Furthermore, intensive customer-facing sectors such as retail and healthcare carry specific risk. Here, a strict policy will continue to be needed to preserve safety measures. Formal measures to support overworked — even traumatized — employees, will be as important.

## 5 We need to plan forward to go backward

A re-appearance of the virus cannot be excluded

Businesses will re-start in a positive position with healthy employees. However, there are no guarantees that this positive trend will be sustained. It is possible that the virus will re-appear, leading to a need to step back into lockdown.

From the start, attention will have to be paid to clearly communicating the action plan that is envisaged to address this eventuality. Linked to this, companies will also have to cover themselves against potential liability claims.



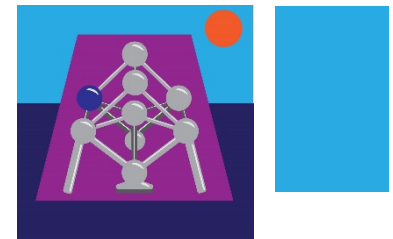
Companies will also have to cover themselves against potential liability claims.

## 6 Talent strategy will be under the spotlight

Hiring, re-training and offboarding will be core tasks

In the wake of COVID-19, companies will require new management competences and a potential overhaul of talent strategy. New hires may be called for, as well as development programs to align the skillset of existing employees with post-COVID-19 needs.

Inevitably, the difficult economic situation will lead to offboarding plans, and a clear picture of critical talents will be vital. Policy will need to follow two axes: on one hand, a compassionate, transparent and fair approach for people who are asked to leave. On the other hand, the remaining employees will require motivation to go the extra mile in difficult circumstances. It will be necessary to create a working environment in which reflection and the courage to take creative initiatives are central, retaining employees who are able to see difficult situations as a positive challenge. The crisis will leave companies bereft of budget to take additional initiatives. Personal leadership will be a decisive factor for success.



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# 7

## Top Management must not only assess, but be assessed.

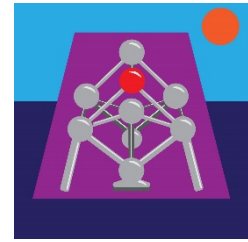
The crisis and post-management skills of senior managers will be a crucial determinant — also for them.

Top Management is often forgotten in crises, automatically (even conveniently) believed to be the right captains for the ship. Yet leaders will be confronted with the return of employees, many highly motivated, to whom they will have to bring the sobering message of economic crisis. They will have to let people go, and take other tough measures to survive and satisfy shareholders.

They will face multiple situations to which they have no ready-made answer. It is always lonely at the top and in this situation, particularly so. There is no guarantee that the right decisions will be taken.

So any talent competency analysis will also need to extend to senior level, to assess qualities such as out of the box, solution-oriented thinking, motivating remote communication skills, and the ability and willingness to seek alternative approaches. Installing a crisis committee with various stakeholders was just one example raised.

Trade unions and other syndicates could play a supportive role, it was proposed. However, based on their communication over the past few weeks, many conclude that they have yet to take up the reins.



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# Re-starting the Engines in the Heart of Europe

## 5 Talent Management Messages

### 1 **Ambiguous times require an incremental approach; trial and error, failure tolerance, and learning.**

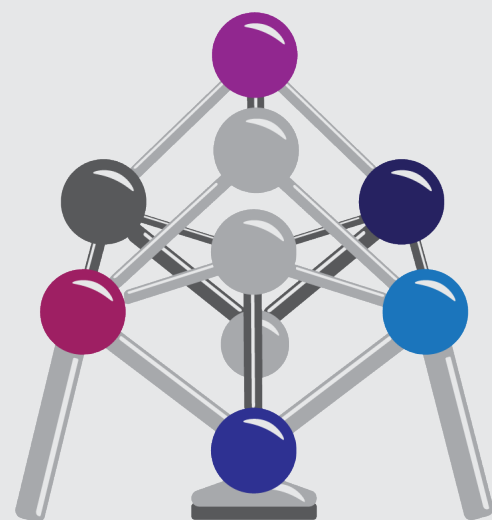
Absent any handbook with the ideal scenario, we will have to accept a world of trial and error. A degree of failure tolerance will be needed from senior executives — something that is acutely difficult to maintain in times of time and financial pressure. Learning from what doesn't work, however, is as valuable as learning from what does.

### 2 **The best leaders will resolve the paradox of damage control and creation. Openness, agility and a positive attitude to change will be the levers.**

It will be essential to create the right context with a balanced focus. On one hand, *damage control* (due to the drop in business, decrease in salaries and bonuses, the departure of colleagues, and financial crisis when governmental interventions stop). On the other hand, *creation* of an innovative workspace allowing the introduction of new visions, ways of working, market opportunities. Reconciling *damage control* and *creation* will require openness, agility and a positive attitude to change.

### 3 **Systemic agility requires dynamic, personalized people management. Situational leadership will be more important than functional expertise.**

Business life will not be as before, and the new normal will require a more dynamic human capital philosophy. Managers will need to guide their people to constantly adapt to unfolding situations, and this will require a personalized touch, particularly via coaching. New talents will also need to be found, recruited less on the basis of functional expertise than on situational leadership skills. We can anticipate a war for these profiles.





## 4

### **Expect people's perspective to shift — health will be more important than wealth**

The human capital impact of the new ways of working remains to be fully seen. Key indicators at risk include motivation, satisfaction, well-being (and conversely, stress), and ultimately, the sense of belonging. This erosion may start to be seen in people's performance, reducing operational effectiveness, raising costs. A shift in emphasis, already present before the crisis, may accelerate as a large part of your talent unhooks from the traditional, financially-oriented orientation (shareholder primacy). Personal health and well-being will rise to the top of minds. Forward looking business leaders understand the wisdom of doing well by doing good, and will be able to resolve this second paradox; *health vs. wealth*.

## 5

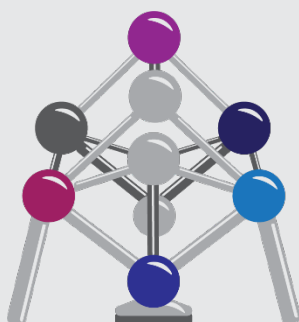
### **HR leadership will more important than ever**

HR will have to take up an active role and should become the conductor of people transformation programs. They should act as true strategic and business partners, acting as a catalyst to move forward.

### **Benoit Lison is Managing Partner of Amrop in Belgium, and a member of Amrop's Digital Practice**

Benoit has developed sound expertise in the Telecom, Multimedia, Professional and Financial Services sectors, as well as in Consumer and Retail. He has also worked for the Public Sector, both in Belgium and internationally.

He obtained his B.A. in Economics from the University of Ghent and a postgraduate degree in Human Resources from EHSAL Brussels. He is fluent in French, Dutch and English.





## About Amrop

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Amrop advises the world's most dynamic organizations on finding and positioning Leaders For What's Next: top talent, adept at working across borders in markets around the world.

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