



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Transportation Research Part D

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/trd

The employee mobility budget: Aligning sustainable transportation with human resource management?

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Discourse analysis
Human resource management
Mobility budget
Sustainable mobility

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how a particular tool in the employment relationship has become part of a desirable transport future. We examine how and why the employee mobility budget has entered the set of sustainable transport measures in Belgium. In a discourse analysis, we examined 52 articles from newspapers, magazines as well as research reports. The main actors in the debate are identified using an exploratory social network analysis, and we discuss the various definitions of the employee mobility budget, the framing of the problems to be solved (in the first place congestion), and the main conflicts between actors. The results reveal the sustained efforts to put the idea on the agenda and the formation of a coalition of the willing. The fact that the mobility budget concept is highly compatible with the hegemonic discourse on employment relations contributes to its popularity. Finally, the individualisation of employment relations and the decrease in attention for environmental aspects are highlighted as potential threats of the type of sustainable mobility policy studied in this paper.

1. Introduction: a human resource management tool for sustainable transport

Sustainable mobility can be seen as a discourse in which a desirable transport future is portrayed characterised by cleaner vehicles, a seamless public transport network, liveable walkable neighbourhoods and other elements. Although strong emphasis has been placed on emission reductions, the notion of sustainable mobility includes virtually all mobility-related strategies which are considered ‘good’ and ‘desirable’ (Boussauw and Vanoutrive, 2017). Despite the problematization of particular policies, there often seems to exist a broad consensus on which measures are desirable and sustainable. What is often less clear is why and how a particular measure enters the set of desirable initiatives, while further knowledge about the origins might reveal important clues about the nature, construction and potential effects of strategies, and hence, their desirability. This genealogical perspective emphasises that sustainable and desirable transport futures are constructed rather than given. This paper addresses the origin of a particular sustainable transport measure: the mobility budget for employees in Belgium. The mobility budget is enthusiastically promoted by sustainable mobility proponents as a win-win solution for the congestion problem, environmental issues and employee dissatisfaction. The proposal also epitomises the shift towards self-entrepreneurial mobility policies and sustainable consumption strategies.

A mobility budget is generally understood as an individual budget provided by the employer to cover (work-related) travel expenses. With this virtual budget, employees can select and pay for transport equipment or services from a range of options, and it is argued that correct price signals would encourage them to become more multimodal and ‘rational’. The primary target group for the

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.trd.2017.10.005>

Received 9 May 2017; Received in revised form 16 August 2017; Accepted 7 October 2017

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budget are company car users, who, according to estimates by Laine and Van Steenberg (2016), drive larger vehicles and travel more kilometres as a consequence of the beneficial fiscal treatment of company cars and fuel cards which results in a social cost of €2361 per company car per year. The idea of the employee mobility budget is related to flexible benefit plans (Baeten and Verwaeren, 2012; Barber et al., 1992; Hillebrink, 2006), parking cash-out programs (Shoup, 2005, 1997), and the popular notion of *Mobility as a Service*.

In this paper we focus on the reasons why the idea of the mobility budget has gained popularity in Belgium in the 2010s. We start from the premise that policy measures become acceptable and popular if they are part of a popular discourse which determines what can and cannot be said (Hajer, 1995; Mayr, 2008). Furthermore, discourses and particular solutions promoted in these discourses are actively constructed. Therefore, we list the relevant actors in the mobility budget debate together with their opinions. But first, we introduce the context of our study, the company car culture in Belgium, the popular explanations for the problems associated with this culture, and at a more general level, we discuss present-day discourses on labour and human resource management. This study not only illustrates how a particular idea has become perceived as an obvious solution, it also sheds light on the relation between employment policies and sustainable mobility. Not only is the workplace considered an appropriate context to approach commuters (Bonham and Koth, 2010; Dickinson et al., 2003) and is travel behaviour and transport policy influenced by human resource management (HRM) practices and discourses, mobility has also obtained a central position in HRM discourse. Highly mobile employees who are able to manage their mobility in an efficient manner have become prototypical of contemporary successful entrepreneurial staff members (Kesselring, 2015; Sennett, 1999; Sheller and Urry, 2006) the case of academic travel is another example of this trend (Storme et al., 2013; Hopkins et al., 2016).

2. Context and definition

2.1. Belgium's company car culture

In Belgium and in some neighbouring countries one can observe a culture of work-related travel cost remuneration by the employer (Potter et al., 1999, 2006; Vanoutrive et al., 2010). Not only is the employee compensated for business trips, they also receive compensation for commuting. The roots of this system can be traced back to the cheap rail season tickets in the second half of the 19th century (De Decker, 2011). Later on, commuting costs for employees were further reduced (Mérenne-Schoumaker et al., 1999; Verhetsel et al., 2009). Today commuting is subsidised in a variety of ways, from tax-free bicycle allowances, through public transport season tickets paid by employers without taxes on labour, to beneficial treatment of car commuting expenses.

Regarding company cars, the current system in Belgium makes a distinction between three types of trips. First, there are business-related trips, which are the *raison d'être* of company cars since employees are not supposed to pay for trips carried out on behalf of their employer. Second, commuting trips get a favourable fiscal treatment since work is considered a socially beneficial trip purpose. Third, private trips get a less favourable fiscal treatment, although it remains significantly cheaper to travel by company car than with a private car, especially since fuel cards provided by the employer are common.

Remarkably, business trips seem to have become a side issue, according to the perception of many. Which is in line with the observation that 'evidence from Belgium and the Netherlands suggests that [...] pure business use represents only about 20–30 percent of company car use, the rest being pure private use and home-work commutes' (Næss-Schmidt and Winiarczyk, 2010, p. 9). In other words, many people with a company car hardly make any business trips. There is even a name for this phenomenon in Belgium: 'salariswagen' or 'voiture salaire' (*salary car*). Indeed, a culture of company cars is well-established in Belgium. Meanwhile, the company car is associated with excessive use, safety issues, parking problems and other issues (De Borger and Wuyts, 2011; De Witte et al., 2008; Laine and Van Steenberg, 2016; Shifan et al., 2012; for recent reviews outside Belgium see Roy, 2014; Scott et al., 2012).

2.2. From under-taxation to the principal-agent problem

The two main explanations for the popularity of the company car in Belgium are firmly nested in economics (Zijlstra, 2016; cf. Cohen-Blankshtain, 2008). The first and dominant explanation is under-taxation. As a result of the fiscal system, many employees do not receive a company car because they need one for the job; but simply as part of their remuneration package. The progressive tax system makes that this is especially beneficial for higher incomes groups (De Borger and Wuyts, 2011; Næss-Schmidt and Winiarczyk, 2010; OECD, 2013; Shifan et al., 2012).

The other explanation can best be described as an example of the principle-agent problem, and more specifically the issue of split incentives (IEA, 2007). Employees with a company car are (partially) insulated from various price signals, and the provision of 'free' fuel cards to employees will result in over-consumption (Graus and Worrell, 2008). Employers on the other hand, might select suboptimal cars for the company car fleet as they are not willing to pay for certain features that would have been selected by the employees themselves (Shifan et al., 2010). As will become clear, the mobility budget is explicitly framed as an attempt to bridge the gap between supplier and user. One of the main ways to bridge the gap is the option to cash-out any remaining budget at the end of the year. This is presented as an incentive to choose wisely.

2.3. Employment relations in the era of self-control

Explanations based on principle agent theory and under-taxation, however, can only provide a partial understanding of the

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