

PIONEERING EMPLOYER PRACTICES

# What France Can Teach Us About Sustainability and Inclusion

A strategic analysis of the French labour market through the lens of sustainable employer practices, social safety and inclusion

Insights gained during the “Future of Work” study tour, Paris 2025



## Colophon

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Meaningful  
Work



# 1. ESG as a Strategic Framework for Sustainable Employer Practices

The growing urgency of global challenges—climate change, social inequality and cyber-security—demands structural change within organisations. In this context, ESG criteria (Environmental, Social and Governance) are gaining traction as an integrated framework for operationalising corporate social responsibility. Whereas the “E” is typically linked to climate and environmental targets, the Social (S) and Governance (G) dimensions are acquiring increasing strategic relevance for employer policy. Despite deferred regulation and geopolitical turbulence, companies are gradually shifting their focus from compliance to transformation: How can they meaningfully contribute to social sustainability, internal cohesion and inclusive leadership—and which companies are setting the pace?

In both France and the Netherlands, labour markets are under pressure from demographic ageing, technological shifts, the rise of AI and a growing demand for purposeful work. Employees—especially younger generations—now expect more from their employers: safe, inclusive and human-centred workplaces that align with societal values. ESG objectives therefore provide not only a yardstick but also a compass for sustainable organisational development.

This white paper explores how the concept of sustainable employer practices is evolving in day-to-day business, and how organisations in France and the Netherlands address issues such as social safety and inclusion. These themes are inseparable from the broader ESG agenda: inclusive and safe workplaces not only enhance employee well-being but are also prerequisites for resilient, future-proof organisations.

Against this backdrop, the document offers an in-depth analysis of the French labour market, complemented by a comparison with the Dutch context. It reviews best practices in both countries and extracts valuable lessons for research and practice alike. Using three interconnected core concepts—sustainable employer practices, social safety and inclusion—we outline a framework for sustainable organisational development. We treat these concepts as mutually reinforcing building blocks within the wider ESG approach: inclusion is a pre-condition for social safety, and both are essential for achieving sustainable employer status.

By linking these concepts to real-world examples, stakeholder analyses and strategic recommendations, this white paper contributes to a shared Franco-Dutch learning trajectory on sustainable employer practices. We begin with a clarification of key terms, followed by relevant perspectives and insights—derived from company visits—on how French and Dutch organisations tackle sustainability challenges.

A practical “Strategic Sustainable Employer Scorecard” is provided in the appendix.





## 2. Clarifying the Concepts: Three Pillars, One Integrated Framework

A clear definition of terms is vital for analysing the French labour market. In this white paper we use the following definitions:

- **Sustainable employer practices** — An employer's responsibility to keep employees employable, engaged and healthy over the long term, while balancing ecological, economic and social sustainability (SER, 2022; UN, 2015; NPDI, 2025).
- **Social safety** — A work environment in which employees feel free to speak up without fear of retaliation, discrimination or intimidation, with safeguards against misconduct and room for feedback (TNO, 2023).
- **Inclusion** — Active policy and culture ensuring that all employees, regardless of background, have equal access to opportunities, appreciation and decision-making. Workforce diversity concerns the presence of different groups defined within a shared national-cultural context (Mor Barak, 2014). Inclusive organisations allow people to be fully themselves while contributing as valued members of the collective (Ferdman, 2013).

Before presenting best-practice cases, we discuss several contextual differences and labour-market challenges in France and the Netherlands.





# 3. Contextual Analysis and Labour-Market Challenges

## 3.1 Key Characteristics

Labour-market policies in France and the Netherlands differ in regulation, flexibility, social security and approaches to unemployment. The Dutch labour market has become more flexible in recent years, with many temporary contracts, part-time jobs and self-employed workers. France, by contrast, maintains a rigid market with strong protection for permanent contracts and complex dismissal procedures.

In unemployment policy, the Netherlands applies an activation strategy with shorter benefit periods and a focus on reintegration. France offers longer-term benefits with greater income protection. Dutch government, employers and trade unions cooperate under the “polder model,” whereas in France the state plays a more dominant role and social-partner consultation is less structural. On minimum wage and labour costs, Dutch employers face lower costs due to lower social contributions, while French costs are higher owing to a comparatively high minimum wage and heavier levies. Temporary and informal work is widespread in the Netherlands thanks to relaxed regulation; France is more restrictive, focusing on permanent contracts—often with mixed results (see also Tables 3.1 and 3.2).

Table 3.1 Summary of Labour-Market Characteristics: Netherlands vs France.

Characteristic	Netherlands – key points	France – key points
Labour-market flexibility	High	Low
Unemployment benefits	Shorter, geared towards rapid reintegration	Longer duration, higher benefit levels
Role of social partners	Significant – “polder model” tripartite dialogue	More limited; government plays the leading role
Employer labour costs	Lower	Higher (due to heavier social charges)
Use of temporary contracts	Many self-employed (zzp) and flexible contracts	Clear divide between fixed-term (CDD) and permanent (CDI) jobs

The French labour market faces three major challenges.

First, France has long struggled with relatively high unemployment—particularly among young people and those with lower vocational qualifications. In addition, the wide gap between permanent contracts and fixed-term jobs creates insecurity for many workers. Second, French labour law is complex, making it difficult for employers to respond quickly to economic change. Although recent reforms have begun to tackle this issue, achieving the right balance between flexibility and protection remains a key concern.

Third, despite France’s commitment to equality, the integration of older workers, people who need additional support, migrants and women in certain sectors still lags behind. Structural barriers such as labour-market discrimination and limited access to opportunities persist.

When we compare the two labour markets in broad terms, we conclude that France struggles with considerable rigidity and insufficient transition into permanent employment, whereas the Netherlands—while not without its own issues—continues to investigate and promote organisational practices that foster the inclusion of people who are distant from the labour market

### 3.2 Characteristics of Sustainable Employer Practices within Organisations

Sustainable employer practices involve deliberately creating a work environment in which employees remain healthy, motivated and employable not only today but over the long term. In practice this looks different across countries. Focusing on the Dutch and French contexts reveals important contrasts in employment relations, employability policies, legal frameworks and development opportunities. Based on labour-market knowledge in both countries, we can highlight key differences in:

- Employment relations and consultation structures
- Attention to sustainable employability
- Legal obligations and frameworks
- Commitment to lifelong learning

It is important to note that such differences are intentionally “magnified” for comparative purposes; within each country, organisations may vary significantly. Nuances and best-practice examples are discussed in Chapters 4–7.

The Dutch labour market is characterised by the so-called polder model, which stresses consensus and dialogue among social partners—employers, employee organisations and government. Inside companies this results in mandatory cooperation with works councils and trade unions.

French organisations, by contrast, tend to have a more hierarchical culture. Decisions are often made in a top-down fashion, and direct employee input is less common. Trade unions do play a role, but their influence is frequently exerted through collective actions such as strikes or via legal channels rather than ongoing workplace or sector-level consultation. Consequently, the industrial climate in France is generally more conflict-prone and formal than in the Netherlands. (See Table 3.2: Employment Relations and Consultation Structure).

Tabel 3.2 **Employment Relations and Consultation Structure.**

Characteristic	Netherlands – Business perspective	France – Business perspective
<b>Consultation method</b>	Defined by the polder model: structured tripartite dialogue among employers, employees and government	More hierarchical culture with less emphasis on direct employer–employee consultation
<b>Role of trade unions</b>	Trade unions and works councils are key negotiation partners at company and sector level	Unions exert influence mainly through strikes and legal action rather than continuous workplace dialogue
<b>Industrial relations climate</b>	Employers often invest proactively in constructive labour relations	Employers also invest, but the climate is typically more formal and conflict-prone

#### 3.2.1 Focus on Sustainable Employability

In the Netherlands, a significant number of employers pay close attention to employee well-being. Topics such as job satisfaction, autonomy and work–life balance feature prominently on corporate agendas. Companies frequently take the initiative to prevent burnout and absenteeism through vitality programmes, modern occupational-health policies and flexible work arrangements such as remote work or part-time schedules. Nonetheless, social inequality remains a concern—particularly the gap between employees with theoretical versus vocational qualifications.

In France, the spotlight rests more on statutory protection of employment conditions. The well-known 35-hour working week is a prime example, as are extensive regulations covering working hours and rest breaks. Although flexible working is on the rise in France, it is not yet standard practice. Proactive, preventive well-being policies are generally less embedded in French work culture than in the Netherlands.

### *Conclusion*

Sustainable employer practices take fundamentally different forms in the two countries. Dutch employers operate within the polder model and seek constructive labour relations together with trade unions and government—yet implementation varies widely between organisations. French employers function in a system that relies more heavily on legal protection, collective rights and hierarchical decision-making. Both models offer valuable insights, but they clearly demonstrate how culture, legislation and consultation structures shape the way organisations define good employer practices.

## 3.3 Labour-Market Policy Aimed at Untapped Talent Potential

The principal differences between Dutch and French labour-market policies lie in labour relations and working conditions. Dutch employees attach greater value to autonomy, participation and work-life balance, and there is often more investment in sustainable employability and health. The Dutch market is also marked by stronger employee involvement and the need to work longer due to a shrinking workforce.

In France, the emphasis tends to be on hierarchy, work ethic and collective labour rights. As a result, employees may enjoy less autonomy but often feel highly connected to their organisation. Decisions are more likely to be taken top-down, and there is generally greater focus on social protection and job security. Workload and stress levels can sometimes be higher in France due to stricter labour regulations, whereas Dutch employees typically prioritise flexibility and autonomy. In short, the countries differ in culture, labour policy

and work style, all of which influence employees' day-to-day experience and challenges.

Both nations have developed policies for jobseekers, though the implementation differs. Dutch policy targets people who struggle to find or keep work because of physical, cultural, psychological or social barriers—such as the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities and practically trained workers. France addresses a similar population but places stronger emphasis on the long-term unemployed, residents of disadvantaged suburbs (banlieues) and youth without basic qualifications (NEETs: Not in Education, Employment or Training).

The Dutch approach is largely activating. Municipalities are responsible for job-placement support via the Participation Act, wage subsidies and job coaching. Social enterprises and sheltered-work companies provide tailored guidance for people with disabilities. The Banenafsprak (Jobs Agreement) commits government and employers to additional positions for people with disabilities. Benefits are combined with activation measures and obligations such as job-search requirements and community service.

France, by contrast, follows a more centralised, protective strategy. The national agency Pôle emploi guides jobseekers but offers less regional customisation. Insertion programmes promote social inclusion through internships, apprenticeships and subsidised roles (emplois aidés). France also enforces a quota: firms with more than 20 employees must ensure at least 6 % of staff are people with disabilities, or pay a penalty.

Regarding employer incentives, the Netherlands offers wage subsidies for lower-productivity workers, a no-risk insurance policy during illness, and training subsidies via municipalities. France emphasises subsidised jobs in the public and non-profit sectors alongside payroll-tax reductions for hiring youth, long-term unemployed and people with disabilities. Specialised agencies such as Cap emploi support this process.



### Summary

The Netherlands focuses more on regional customisation and activation, while France remains centrally organised with a stronger emphasis on protection. Employer involvement is steadily increasing in the Netherlands (e.g., through the Banenafspraak), whereas in France it is often driven by legal obligations or sanctions. Both countries acknowledge that bureaucracy—whether municipal in the Netherlands or national in France—can restrict overall effectiveness.

Tabel 3.3 **Characteristics of Labour-Market Policy.**

Characteristic	Netherlands – Key Points	France – Key Points
<b>Regional customisation</b>	Strong – delivered through municipalities and regional work-development organisations	Less regional – policy is more centrally coordinated
<b>Activation focus</b>	High – clear obligations for benefit recipients	Lower pressure – greater emphasis on income protection
<b>Employer involvement</b>	Growing, driven by the “Jobs Agreement” for people with disabilities	Less automatic, often prompted by legal penalties
<b>Bureaucracy</b>	Municipal policies can be fragmented	Pôle emploi processes often bureaucratic and slow

Een goede inbedding in dit bredere ecosysteem van bedrijven en instellingen vraagt van werkgevers ...that they cultivate an outward-looking mindset as well as the ability to network and collaborate. Research confirms that no single, universally applicable blueprint exists for building sustainable organisations. Creating the right work environment is an ongoing learning process—one that benefits equally from successes and setbacks. Essential components include applying proven principles for safe and inclusive organisation, sharing knowledge and experience on the shop floor and across inter-organisational networks, and conducting periodic, learning-oriented reviews of progress toward a truly inclusive workplace.

*This white paper therefore distils the lessons learned from French front-runner companies in sustainable employer practice. We explicitly identify the stakeholders involved in meeting these challenges, illustrating best practices at each stage—from the first strategic decisions on workplace safety, through HR policy implementation, to full institutional anchoring in corporate governance.*

## 3.4 Macro Pressure and Culture as System Constraints

Macro-economic conditions and national culture act as system boundaries for the labour markets of both France and the Netherlands. While similar trends are visible in each country, their impact differs owing to distinct institutional and cultural contexts.

**Economic factors.** France is forecast to post an 8 % unemployment rate in 2025, with GDP growth of just 0.1 %. A budget deficit of 6 % is slated to be reduced to 3 % by 2029, triggering spending cuts—especially in social security and sustainability programmes—that weigh on labour-market development.

**Legal factors.** Tensions are high. Raising the retirement age to 64 has sparked widespread public resistance. Sector-level collective agreements—particularly in the ten dominant industries—remain the legal backbone of HR policy. Although ESG criteria and equal-treatment laws have been introduced, concrete behavioural change at organisational level is still limited.

**Socio-cultural factors.** Persistent opportunity gaps are closely tied to social background and networks; university pedigree heavily influences labour-market access. Collective thinking can clash with individual career ambitions, hindering talent development and flexibility.

By contrast, the Netherlands operates a more decentralised system that relies on tailored arrangements negotiated by social partners and sectoral self-regulation. This approach stimulates innovation and participation and gives organisations greater latitude to align policy with sector- and company-specific needs.

# 4. Lessons from the Company Visits

The site visits highlighted four strategic focal points for sustainable employer practice:

1. Opportunities and barriers in regional ecosystems
2. Multi-stakeholder buy-in to connect people, work and organisation
3. Inclusion as a social process
4. Contextual scope and differences in psychological and social safety.

## 4.1 The Netherlands as Partner: Regional Ecosystem Thinking in Europe

at the Dutch embassy in Paris and with the Netherlands Chamber of Commerce underscored the growing Franco-Dutch economic partnership, fuelled by Brexit and faster digital trade. France is now the Netherlands' third-largest export market, while the Netherlands ranks eighth for France—trends confirmed by the new Trade Sub-Index, which shows steady French investment in AI, energy, mobility and water management.

Both countries' shared focus on sustainability is creating fertile ground for partnerships, especially as French firms reposition themselves for climate transition—exemplified by the energy group EDF. The embassy stressed that successful collaboration in France hinges on “relationship-based cooperation”: formal roles, hierarchy and the right networks drive outcomes. Dutch companies operating there must adapt to the relational, hierarchical nature of French business, where confrontation is an accepted management tool and decision-making is formal and top-down

## 4.2 Paradoxes in the French Labour Market

Unemployment remains high (8 %) despite strong growth potential in sectors such as energy, AI and mobility. The strict “diploma culture” makes university credentials—not talent or experience—the gateway to jobs. Closed networks of friends and family shape job-to-job transitions, while resistance to decentralisation persists; tailored approaches like EDF's team projects are still the exception. Even so, signs are hopeful: EDF shows that system renewal is possible when linked to national symbolism, shared interest and patriotic pride (for example, around the Olympic Games).

Tabel 4.1 **Stakeholder Analysis within Ecosystems: Hierarchy, Unions and Closed Networks.**  
(See document).

Stakeholder	France – Main Role/Position	Netherlands – Main Role/Position
<b>Employers</b>	Formal responsibility with a strong focus on compliance and regulation	Strategic HR partner
<b>Employees</b>	Limited direct participation; trade unions speak on their behalf	Active participation through works councils (OR) and direct employee involvement
<b>HR</b>	Regulated, primarily instrumental role	Facilitator of cultural change
<b>Trade unions</b>	Strong but not broadly representative	Broadly supported and actively involved in policy-making

The Netherlands adopts a more activating and decentralised approach—implemented through municipalities and employer agreements—whereas France operates a more centrally directed and protective system. Both labour markets face numerous, strikingly similar challenges, such as addressing shortages of skilled staff. Many organisations are dealing with a substantial outflow of employees reaching retirement age and a relatively limited inflow of young talent. Work itself—accelerated by technological advances—is also changing, creating opportunities but simultaneously generating uncertainty and resistance. These challenges stem partly from new developments (e.g., the rise of generative AI) and partly from structural shifts in both labour-demand and labour-supply dynamics (e.g., the flexibilisation and intensification of work and an ageing workforce). Consequently, employers in both France and the Netherlands struggle to attract and retain talent, advance diversity and inclusion, and embed sustainable employer practices.

## 4.3 Lens for Sustainable Employer Practices

Research shows that certain employers do succeed in hiring people with a wide range of learning and support needs. Four critical focus areas (Van der Aa, 2020) underpin truly inclusive, sustainable employer practice:

1. Build broad-based support for psychological safety throughout the organisation. Storytelling about sustainability alone is insufficient; employers must also address the very real constraints and possibilities on the shop floor. Only then can a credible starting point for change and workplace support emerge. A safer environment benefits everyone—not just new hires from less-privileged groups.
2. Maintain a continuous, people-centred focus on aligning the work environment, diverse individual work values and talents, and organisational goals. This alignment does not occur—or remain—automatically. Job descriptions, vacancy texts, appraisal criteria and matching processes must all be regularly revisited. As jobs become increasingly temporary, frequent transitions between work and non-work are inevitable.
3. Recognise inclusion as a social process grounded in mutual appreciation and acceptance. The workplace is a social setting; employees who deviate from what is considered “normal” require extra attention to feel integrated.
4. Create appropriate support structures, both inside the organisation and across the wider ecosystem of public and private institutions. Support may concern job tasks as well as personal matters requiring temporary or long-term attention. Companies need not provide everything themselves, but they should connect with existing municipal services, employment agencies and social-care providers, and collaborate with other firms to create mobility pathways.

The concluding chapter will reflect on best practices observed at French companies during the study tour, using this four-point lens.



# 5. Exemplary Employer Practices at EDF in France

Électricité de France (EDF) follows a people-centric, sustainable HR strategy designed to attract, retain and develop talent in line with its social and ecological responsibilities. As a public player in the energy transition, EDF positions its employees at the heart of corporate strategy and operations. EDF became a Premium Partner and official electricity and gas supplier for the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games, reinforcing the group's leadership in energy transition and responsible business.

## 5.1 Strategic Talent Development

EDF invests heavily in training, knowledge transfer and skills development. Each year the company recruits thousands of new employees—including a high proportion of young professionals through apprenticeships, internships and entry-level roles. In 2024 alone, EDF hired more than 10,000 people in France, notably in nuclear, renewable energy and digital technology. The goal is to prepare staff for future challenges such as carbon neutrality, digitalisation and safety.

## 5.2 Modern Work Organisation and Feedback Culture

EDF promotes an innovative management culture in which employees experience autonomy, trust and accountability. Traditional annual appraisals have been replaced by frequent “check-ins” between employees and managers, focusing on career development, well-being, goals and skills—thereby boosting engagement and transparency.

## 5.3 Well-Being and Work–Life Balance

Through flexible models (remote work, sliding schedules, hybrid arrangements) and its internal agreement *Travailler autrement*, manager *autrement* (2021), EDF supports healthy work–life balance. Well-being programmes, sports offerings and preventive healthcare further promote physical and mental health.

## 5.4 Diversity, Inclusion and Equal Opportunity

EDF is committed to equal opportunity, gender parity and disability inclusion. Since signing the Diversity Charter in 2006, it has concluded multiple collective agreements covering disability inclusion, equal pay and inclusive recruitment. EDF scored 92/100 on the 2023 gender-equality index. Employees engage actively in diversity networks—women-in-tech, LGBTQ+ groups, intergenerational forums—and the company prioritises Paralympic sport and accessibility initiatives.

## 5.5 Health, Safety and Ethical Conduct

Strict policies govern safety, psychosocial well-being and ethics. Confidential reporting channels, ethics hotlines, codes of conduct and mandatory training are standard, with special focus on preventing discrimination, harassment and burnout.

## 5.6 Participation and Collective Engagement

EDF fosters employee participation through share-ownership schemes, strong works-council structures and frequent dialogue. The “Energy Games,” organised internally during Paris 2024, mobilised 25,000 staff. Team EDF, a collective of elite (para-)athletes, reinforces performance culture, inclusion and brand pride.

## 5.7 EDF as a Best Practice

EDF illustrates how a traditional state-owned utility can transform into a modern, forward-looking employer by embedding sustainability, inclusion and vitality in its core. All initiatives feed into a clear Employee Value Proposition: “Working at EDF means contributing to a more sustainable society, together.” Programmes such as Mobility Month, Group University learning paths, self-organising team projects, structured hybrid work and robust family policies translate this proposition into daily practice

## 5.8 Responsible Employer Policy at SUEZ in France

SUEZ pursues a forward-thinking HR agenda focused on employee well-being, development and engagement. Key pillars include:

- *Continuous learning*: more than 50 % of staff took training in 2021 (average 18 hours per person). The company consistently earns Top Employer France certification.
- *Work-life balance*: since November 2020, a collective telework agreement allows up to two voluntary home-working days per week, with stipends, meal vouchers, IT equipment and a three-month onboarding period.
- *Health & safety*: a proactive “zero serious or fatal accident” strategy, regular safety campaigns and clear psychosocial-risk guidelines.
- *Fair pay*: transparent, market-aligned remuneration, closing gender pay gaps (equality index 89/100 in 2023). The Go SUEZ plan aims for 10 % employee share ownership by 2029.
- *Diversity & inclusion*: zero tolerance for discrimination; the WO&MEN network (800 members) drives gender-equality awareness.
- *Open culture*: regular digital town-halls and an annual Pulse survey gauge engagement and inform improvements.

## 5.9 Comparative Perspective: EDF vs SUEZ

EDF and SUEZ highlight the French model of performance and excellence, characterised by hierarchy, role consciousness and symbolism. Formal structures and clear authority remain central. Inclusion is treated largely as a legal and political mandate—as opposed to the Dutch focus on egalitarian dialogue and HR-led psychological safety. Meaningful culture change in France thus requires formal legitimacy, strategic symbolism (titles, networks, status) and top-down guidance. EDF demonstrates that impactful renewal is possible when tethered to collective pride, national values and a holistic sustainability vision.





## 6. Investing in a Humane Work Environment Pays Off

Social insecurity and lack of inclusion drive absenteeism, turnover and lost productivity—thereby increasing costs. Psychological insecurity fosters avoidance behaviour, undermining teamwork and innovation and exposing organisations to reputational risk. Humane workplaces are therefore a business necessity, not a luxury. The Netherlands increasingly deploys preventive tools—confidential counsellors, exit interviews, occupational-health services and D&I officers—to identify issues early, reduce escalation and lower costs. While no single measure solves everything, an integrated approach that combines these tools with an open, inclusive culture provides the most effective foundation for a healthy, competitive organisation.

## 7. Reflection on Strategies and Interventions

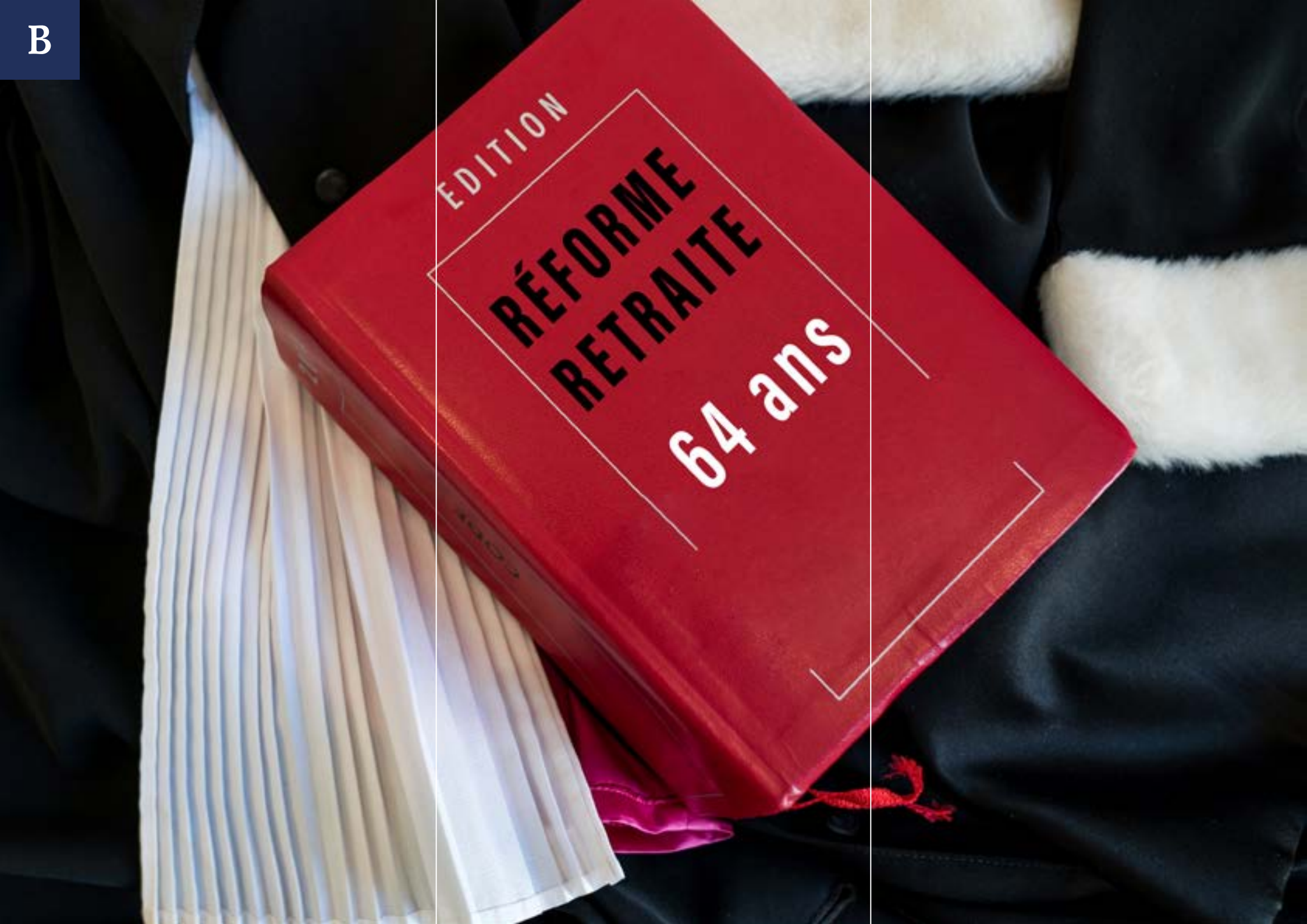
In France, organisational change is often framed as legal compliance; culture-change programmes are the exception. The pension-reform debate exemplifies how *liberté, égalité, fraternité* intersect with sustainability challenges. By contrast, Dutch companies experiment more with cultural initiatives—inclusive-leadership training, psychological-safety dialogues and “safe spaces.”

EDF’s experience shows that targeted employee-engagement efforts deliver results: a 25 % rise in engagement followed the introduction of internal health-and-safety programmes, Olympic-themed events and volunteering schemes. Mobility Month enhanced internal mobility, and vitality events strengthened organisational commitment.

EDITION

# RÉFORME RETRAITE

64 ans





## 8. Comparison

Based on the company visits, the following key differences can be identified:

Theme	Dutch Approach – key traits	French Approach – key traits
<b>Social safety</b>	Openness, open discussion, confidential counsellors	Formal channels, regulated behaviour, cultural barriers
<b>Inclusion</b>	Pragmatic HR policy focused on leveraging diverse talents	Legal equality, limited bottom-up participation
<b>Leadership</b>	Coaching, horizontal, facilitative	Decisive, hierarchical, accountable
<b>Innovation at work</b>	Start-up culture, polder consensus, room for experimentation	Institutional stability, experimentation mainly via pilot projects
<b>Strategic collaboration</b>	Solution-oriented, results-driven	Relationship-driven, formal, long-term focus; informal settings (e.g. lunch meetings) for decisions

### 8.1 Recommendations

Based on the analyses and field examples in this white paper, we offer targeted recommendations for both French employers and Dutch organisations operating in France.

#### For French Employers

1. *Develop a compelling Employee Value Proposition (EVP)* that goes beyond compensation and taps into collective pride, purpose and career development. The EVP must be anchored in both policy and day-to-day behaviour and convey a sense of shared mission.
2. *Leverage senior leadership as visible role models.* Executives should champion inclusive, sustainable goals—e.g., by publishing “ambition stories” or explicitly linking inclusion programmes to core values, as seen at EDF and SUEZ.
3. *Create space for delegated responsibility within existing hierarchies.* Team-based projects, modelled on EDF, can foster collaboration and shared ownership without dismantling formal structures.
4. *Use hybrid work strategically*—not only to boost autonomy but also to strengthen employee–organisation bonds.

### For Dutch Organisations in France

1. *Respect hierarchy and invest in long-term relationships* via formal communication channels. Successful change in France often gains traction only when tied to national symbolism and collective values.
2. *Anchor new initiatives to public events and symbolic touchpoints*—for example, the Olympic Games—to position sustainability and inclusion as shared national priorities.
3. *Frame innovation as a collective endeavour* that supports national goals such as the climate transition, creating fertile ground for internal and external alignment.
4. *Follow EDF's example on internal mobility, learning tracks and informal mentoring*. These measures enhance employability while building an inclusive, learning-oriented culture.

### 5. Cross-Cutting Insights (Van der Aa, 2020)

French leaders like EDF and SUEZ excel at:

- Building broad buy-in for psychosocial safety from top to bottom—e.g., SUEZ executives branding themselves as health & safety leaders.
- Continuously aligning the work environment with diverse employee values and talents, illustrated by ambition stories and testimonials.
- Recognising inclusion as a social process requiring mutual respect and targeted teambuilding so that every employee feels they belong.
- Providing customised support structures and partnering with external organisations (public and private) throughout the broader ecosystem—e.g., intensive assistance for life events or job-related relocations at EDF.

# 9. Final Reflection: From Policy to Meaningful Transformation

The findings confirm that sustainable employer practices are not a distant ideal but a strategic and organisational necessity. In an era of global transitions, social tensions and technological breakthroughs, ESG offers a unifying framework centred on human dignity and collective development.

French case studies show that even hierarchical, institution-heavy systems can adopt innovative employer approaches—provided they are rooted in collective values and led from the top. The Dutch experience demonstrates how decentralised collaboration, psychological safety and shared leadership yield durable results.

Future-proof employer practice depends on a shared learning capacity across countries, sectors and organisations: not a single blueprint, but an ongoing cycle of reflection, experimentation and adaptation built on trust, connection and resilience. The Paris study trip underscores that work in France is more than an economic platform; it is interwoven with culture, pride and structure. Pioneers like EDF show how tradition can merge with progress. By using social safety, inclusion and sustainability as strategic levers, we open space for a shared Franco-Dutch learning agenda where symbol and system meet.

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# ‘WE ARE BERENSCHOT, FOUNDER OF PROGRESS’

The Netherlands is constantly evolving. Major changes are taking place in society, the economy and the nature of organisations. As a management consulting firm we have closely followed these developments for over 80 years while working towards a progressive society. The drive to make a meaningful and proactive contribution for people and society is part of our DNA and our advice and solutions have helped to make the Netherlands what it is today. Always seeking sustainable progress.

Everything we do is carefully researched, substantiated and examined from many different angles. That is the foundation for solid recommendations and smart solutions, which may not always be what people were expecting. It is this capacity to surprise and look beyond the obvious that makes us unique. We are not in the business of simply tackling symptoms. We don't stop until the issue is solved.

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