

## CASE STUDY

# UP GROUP

## Building a Social Foundation for all Employees

Countries present: <b>20</b>	Issue volume: <b>7.7 billion</b>	Rate of access of training in the group in 2018: <b>66.95%</b>	Employment rate of people with disabilities in the Up cooperative: <b>5.56%</b>
Clients: <b>1.1 million</b>	Worker cooperative members: <b>878</b>	Percentage of managers trained in management in the Group in 2018: <b>23.64%</b>	New collective agreements to promote social progress in 2018: <b>16</b>
Beneficiaries: <b>28.9 million</b>	Total worldwide employees: <b>3,593</b>		

The raison d'être of the Up group is to improve citizens' and workers' lives, through the development of payment systems and IT solutions that facilitate the provision of vouchers (for meals or childcare, for example) and expenses management to employees working for different companies or local authorities around the world. But recently it has started to turn the focus on to its own workers – 3,593 in 20 countries across Europe, North Africa and Latin America – to ensure that its cooperative values are reflected throughout the group and its affiliates.

Founded in France in 1964 as *Chèque Coopératif pour la Restauration* ("Cooperative Meal Voucher"), a consumer cooperative, it became a SCOP (**société coopérative et participative, a worker cooperative**) in 1972. **An attention towards worker participation was evident from the creation in 1973 of its own Works Council, despite having a workforce below the legal obligation threshold, and the establishment in 1981 of a Solidarity Fund providing social welfare, solidarity and assistance to group employees and pensioners.** Also in 1981 the official working time in a week was reduced from 40 to 37 hours without salary cuts; it was cut further to 35 hours in 1986, 14 years before the Aubry law enforced a 35-hour working week in France.

Expansion to other countries – Italy, Spain, across Eastern Europe – increased over the years, as did diversification into vouchers for books, music, social and home services and gifts, as well as meal vouchers for volunteers and voluntary workers. All this has been alongside an increasing process of digitalization. In 2006, the group joined the UN Global Compact, defending ten principles regarding human rights, labour rights, environmental protection and fighting corruption. *Chèque Déjeuner* changed its name to become the Up group in 2015.

The group's business in and of itself is in line with the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 8 by facilitating ways for companies to get tax advantages through giving vouchers to their

employees that can be used for benefits that improve their lives. These include nutritionally balanced hot lunches in restaurants outside of their offices, instead of a rushed sandwich at their desks, or being able to pay for childcare or services for the elderly in a declared, "official" way, off the black market. The vouchers also democratize culture, giving workers access to museums, galleries and theatres.

The Up group now has 1.1 million clients (companies and public and social actors), including 825,000 affiliated merchants, and over 28 million beneficiaries (employees and citizens) and is present in 20 countries, including Morocco, Tunisia, Brazil and Mexico as well as across Europe. The core company is the Up cooperative, with headquarters in Gennevilliers, outside Paris, owned by its 800-plus employees. But the group also includes a number of non-cooperatives, including affiliated companies in France – comprising about 450 workers – and almost 50 affiliated companies abroad, meaning that a total of 3,593 people currently work for the group worldwide.

Arnaud Breuil, head of the Ecosystem and Commitments Department, explains the impetus behind the Up group's new initiative to ensure that all of these employees have decent working conditions, in line with SDG 8. "For a long time we used to say we were a workers' cooperative. We were created by trade unions in France and we were a specialist in social dialog, giving workers the possibility of having better working conditions. It was nice for us to say that, but when we started to grow and create affiliated companies in different countries, to buy other companies abroad, all the workers of the company had to see the difference. We have to be different."

The Up group's strategic plan is divided into five areas, with governance, economic, social, societal and environmental programmes. While the governance programme is exploring how the cooperative model can be exported throughout the company, it is the social programme that is looking at how to create a minimum of social advantages that all Up group's employees can access. "In France



we have a social security system so all employees are protected by the national system,” says Breuil. “But in many countries they don’t have a real social security system. As a workers’ cooperative we have a responsibility for all of our workers, especially those abroad who don’t have the benefit of living in a country that gives them a high level of social protection, like healthcare and childcare.” The group is trying to help all of its companies give their employees what in French is called a *socle social*, a social base or foundation.

In 2017, the Human Resources department began defining this foundation, setting minimum social benefits that would be guaranteed by the group for all of its international employees. Five different areas were identified: working hours, social protection, social benefits, working conditions and remuneration. One goal, for example, is to ensure that all workers have access to health insurance, supported by the company.

Dialogue with workers is a key element of this process. A European Works Council, which enables workers to be consulted on all kinds of topics, was created back in 2011, and 2018 saw the institution of 16 new collective agreements, 11 in France and five in other countries. These promote social progress in various areas such as training, remuneration, working hours, health and safety, fostering diversity, professional equality and staff representation. In October 2018 the Up Cooperative received an award from the Observatory for a New Social Dialogue for the establishment of its Economic and Social Committee.

The group takes many other steps to ensure that its employees are cared for. A Trades and Skills Observatory within the group ensures that job positions are adapted based on significant development trends in different trades. The Trades Observatory includes trades experts as well a

human resources manager and two elected staff representatives, including an elected representative from the European Works Council. Training and adaptation to new realities is also integrated into the fabric of the group. Since 2009, the group has undertaken a process of skills management in order to develop employability for long-term employees by ensuring they can adapt to technological and social changes. The move towards increasing digitalization and voucher dematerialization is happening across the group and a recent innovation ensures that every employee is given support through an awareness programme and personalized training, called “Digital (R)evolution”, empowering them to be actively involved in this transformation.

Promoting diversity, equal opportunities and quality of life within the workplace are also key social policies for the Up group. The Cooperative Difference Department supports these policies and ensures they are applied across the entire group, another way of implementing cooperative principles even within subsidiaries and affiliates that are not structured as co-operatives. One agreement has been signed to facilitate the recruitment and retention of workers with disabilities (with a goal of a total employment rate of 4% by the end of 2019), while another, on professional equality and quality of life at work, includes a collaborative childcare application with the group’s French and Belgian employees, with subscription costs paid for by the company.

As Up moves into new business areas and new countries like Colombia, it will be seeking to ensure that its founding cooperative principles are being disseminated throughout the group, benefitting all of its workers and not just the employees of its client companies.