In an attempt to find answers to these questions, researchers from the university in Grenoble have carried out an investigation in four companies in the Rhône-Alpes region, which has shown diverse responses in practice. While these companies are influenced in different ways by cost cutting requirements and while they’re all involved in different activities, all four are using human resources to optimize their innovation capabilities. Each of them recognizes the importance of the company culture, the necessity of an open organization and coaching, and each shows a willingness to improve the motivation for the activity itself, to feed the passion of the researchers.

However, those in charge of recruiting...
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innovative individuals in these four companies have different views on the question of whether these employees need specific management or not. In two of the investigated companies, one of the most noticeable responses from managers was their regret of not having any specific rules or tools of human resources management for their engineers. Therefore, even though there are various internal progression paths, the recruitment of specialists is limited and the possibilities for recognition are deemed insufficient for researchers: “There’s a lack of a reward system, a grading system that recognizes people’s competency in technical terms”; “people with an R & D profile are in a difficult position [...]. There is no way of honoring them. The company treats everyone the same.”

In contrast, the human resources managers of the two other investigated companies are more reluctant in differentiating between individuals involved in innovative activities versus other categories of employees. For one company, it’s a question of strategy: one of their features is the diffuse character of the innovation department; none of the questioned workers in various departments holds the view that innovation is a driving force, and the responsibility for innovation is shared between the various team workers. In this situation, the idea of treating innovative people within the company differently does not make sense, and there is no benefit from implementing different human resources incentives for different types of employees. In the last investigated company, the response was in the same vein: far from giving researchers separate treatment, the management prefers to find ways to bring them closer to the other employees, both in terms of careers and in terms of rewards.

These different approaches are probably due to different factors, such as the type of activity, the investments made in research, or the difficulty the company experiences in attracting and holding on to key innovative individuals. Nonetheless, this investigation has helped us to understand that within human resources management, for innovation there is a dilemma between a specific and a standardized approach.

Innovation management: the dilemma between a specific and a general approach

Good management for innovative individuals requires the implementation of human resources management practices that are specifically adapted to the profiles of these workers. The question whether there should be a specific form of management for innovative staff is a point of debate and tension in all four investigated companies. In other words, views on whether there should be a specific or a general approach for innovative workers varies between the R & D departments on one hand and the human resources departments on the other, and there is disagreement on how to proceed. The discussions we carried out in our investigation with those involved have demonstrated the acuity of this debate. The argument for specific management for innovative employees is limited either by cost restraints or in a larger sense by the refusal to link innovation exclusively to people who are working in R & D teams.

In conclusion, we’d like to give a general method, using two criteria, to answer the question whether or not there should be a different management approach for innovative employees. The first criterion is the context: is cutting costs the company’s first priority, to the point where the innovation budget has to be reduced, or does the management want to promote innovation as a cornerstone on which decisions will be based? In the first case, the main target is to optimize existing procedures; in the second, the priority is to create a breakthrough technology. The second criterion is the management vision on innovative workers in relation to human resources policies: do they pursue special treatment or are they reluctant to diversify within the company?