

Dynamics of employment in a context of industrial clusters: The case of the Montreal Multimedia Sector¹

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The multimedia sector is one of the high-tech sectors that has contributed greatly to revitalizing the economic base of the Montreal region. A relatively young sector, which may be described as post-industrial, it has created high expectations as to its capacity to create jobs and economic wealth. Its many applications have created visions of sustained growth, arousing the interest of many public and private actors in the sector. The sector has fulfilled its promises in part and met a number of expectations, to such an extent that for a number of years it actually experienced labour shortage, raiding of workers, high wages, the creation of many firms and significant interest on the part of the financial community (Tremblay, 2002, 2004; Tremblay et al., 2002) . In short, for a few years the sector was an unqualified success and employment in the sector boomed. The forms of employment of the sector also seemed to be considered as typical of a new form of employment, or new form of “boundaryless career”.

This paper will address the issue of responses to external challenges and its impact on the national model of employment. Although we cannot affirm that the multimedia sector on its own is redesigning the employment forms of the whole national entity, it does seem that the multimedia and IT sectors are opening the way to what some have called a “boundaryless career”, which can also be analysed in terms of independent work or precarious work, depending on the point of view. While boundaryless careers seemed to be the preferred image in the first years of the multimedia boom, the latter years seem to have moved the employment picture more towards precariousness, since the sector has known some difficulty in the last few years. According to some specialists, it is rebounding and the “boundaryless career” could again gain momentum. In our view, these transformations in employment are not unrelated to the industrial form which has been developing, and that is the development of cluster initiatives, in the multimedia sector as in others.

Along with Vancouver and Toronto, Montreal is home to one of the principal concentrations of Canada’s multimedia or “new media” industry. Over the last decade this industry has grown significantly and attracted much attention. This article presents some results from our study of Montreal’s new media industry. We begin by briefly defining the concepts of “industrial districts” and “clusters,” which underlie our research, and examining some definitions of the multimedia sector. We then describe Quebec’s multimedia sector, focusing in particular on the characteristics of its labour force, one of the key elements in most descriptions of clusters or industrial districts, although it is neglected by some cluster specialists. We conclude by presenting a few preliminary observations on employment evolution in the sector as well as on the role that inter-organizational relations and government financial support have played in the industry’s development and by discussing whether or not the Montreal multimedia sector should be defined as a cluster, a district, or a localized system of production. We base most of our analysis on documentary research and 75 interviews conducted with industry personnel. In addition, some of our findings draw on approximately 50 interviews with multimedia personnel.

¹ This paper is partly based on : Tremblay, D.-G., Chevrier, C. and Rousseau, S. (2004) The Montreal Multimedia Sector: District, Cluster or Localized System of Production ? In: David Wolfe and Matthew Lucas (2004, eds). *Clusters in a Cold Climate: Innovation Dynamics in a Diverse Economy*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Conclusion

Let us conclude on a few elements related to governance and employment in the multimedia industry. As was observed in this article, many actors intervene in the sector: public, private, associative, financial and many community actors. In this sense, there appears to be here participation of many social actors in the development and support of a real industrial policy aimed at the multimedia sector and aimed at making of Montreal an important center of multimedia development.

As was indicated, there were various plans put forward by various actors, but very quickly, the various levels of government, federal and provincial, adhered to support the French firm Ubisoft. Local Montreal actors were then determinant in creating a social mobilization in order to obtain some support more or less equivalent to what had been offered to Ubisoft. The Montreal administration as well as some private actors in the financial, cultural and multimedia sector per se all supported at various levels and in various ways the development of this sector and of the firms of the sector. There was consensus around the idea of developing this specific sector and over the years, firms were more and more interested in having some form of public intervention in order to support them in development of products, but even more in commercialization of these products.

It must be recognized that the multimedia sector remains quite young of course, and that it is difficult to guess on its future, considering changes that have occurred in the last year, especially the abolition of the City of Multimedia program, at least for new firms. However, with the establishment of Electronic Arts and the increase in employment figures at Ubisoft, it seems that Montreal remains attractive, beyond the specific programs designed to attract the first firms.

As concerns more specifically employment, we observed that the majority of multimedia workers do indeed fit into the categories of nomads or boundaryless workers. They are mostly people who are not strongly attached to their organizations and even less interested in union representation, but who are more concerned about the challenges offered by their work. Wages and social benefits are not totally negligible, but since many workers are quite young, they tend to be more attracted by projects than by wages and social benefits. Again, this may change as the workforce ages, since older workers and female workers were more concerned with work-life balance and social benefits.