

THÉODORE BOERMANS

We sat down with Théodore Boermans of Urbike, a cycle logistics cooperative in Brussels that provides complementary delivery services to improve the quality of life in cities. An experienced and passionate logistics professional, Théo was able to give us a unique insight into what makes a successful cycle logistics business and worker.

Hi Théodore, could you tell us a little about the professional profile of workers within last mile delivery cycle logistics and your experience at Urbike?

The first most important factor is security on the road. Another very important aspect is that the couriers are valued for the work they do.

They believe in the capacity of the bike, the potential of the bike, therefore it's important for them to be able to work with dignity. For them there is much more to it than just using the bike as a tool, there is a cooperative commitment. This is why I could never go to work at Deliveroo.

At Urbike, there is the interest and the possibility to develop a job on one hand, and on the other hand to do a job in which you can find pride and develop your skills. You can specialise, you can feel competent, there is a pride that can come from the job of bike-courier.

At Urbike, couriers are paid by the hour, not by the task. This allows them to respect the rules of the road, take the time to ride carefully, take the time to do their

work properly and "go the extra mile" – meaning to call the client, find a solution with them, look for destinations complex to localise, have a friendly interaction, etc. – and multiply their tasks outside of delivery. For this, they are assigned hours of mechanical maintenance, warehouse management, collective kitchen and collective decision-making.

I do cycling and projects. The projects are, for example, acquiring the equipment of the couriers. I negotiate with suppliers for the right equipment such as pants and jackets. I work on other projects as well, especially the training – the "on-boarding" – when we welcome the new couriers. We do the screening and the interviews. The training is partly in my hands.

“There is not a lot of discussion on the career path of a courier. We bring a very new perspective to the profession at Urbike, and we are constantly in the process of responding to the evolving needs of the market.”



Théodore Boermans (Credit: Urbike)

A big project at the moment is to better structure the training. It works, but we want to formalise it in a way that it can be used externally and internally. For the moment we have a "Vade-mecum" ("Handbook") for the courier. It explains a lot of things, like how to react to the cold; how to maintain the bike; how to deal with conflicts on the road; and how to deal with unpleasant customers.

In addition to that, there is a chapter for raising awareness: it contains the history of bike couriers and different economic modules on which they are based. Being a bike courier at Urbike is a sustainable, solid job with good working conditions. Other cooperatives and companies are starting to take us as example, and we are invited to share our work experience as an example.

Sometimes there are harsh but valid criticisms of our transport from the side of the couriers. But we are bearing the flag for bicycle logistics in Brussels. There are even discussions in other Belgian

cities with people who want to create cooperatives in our model, and we are being asked to advise them, to help them to set up our model.

Can you talk about the skills and competences that you sense are crucial for a LMD professional in your experience and how do you instruct the newcomers at Urbike?

The skills we are looking for in couriers are that they must be able to navigate in the city and they must be competent with the digital tools. People who don't come from Brussels, who don't know Brussels, they instead need to know how to navigate the city with digital applications. They must have a physical competence to ride a bike and to do handling. We carry up to 200kg of packages. The heavier bikes require good physical skills. French, Dutch or English are required language skills, and they must also have enthusiasm for riding a bike.

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We are looking for autonomous and smart people, able to go to plan B if plan A doesn't work. They have the ability to improvise without endangering the logistic operations. If there is a problem they are able to communicate with the dispatcher and solve the problem together.

For the on-boarding at Urbike, we explain a few things over the course of a full day. We explain the functioning of the cooperative, how the hub works, how the bike works, the trailers and a practical training on loading the bike and loading the trailer. Then there is a one hour practice in traffic.



Andreas Riel of Safe LMD tests out a cargo bike at Urbike offices (Credit: Safe LMD)

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There we can revise the traffic rules and the specificity of the traffic rules for cyclists in Brussels. During the practice, we teach tactics on the road to be adopted during the tours; how to navigate and use the applications we have in use at Urbike; and, finally, we explain the financial context of the cooperative and the expectation of the customers.

To be on the road, you have to know the rules of the road. We expect the riders to work in safety, to be able to return to the hub, to take breaks, to warm up in winter. We insist on the fact that it is a risky job. Never force the riders to ride if they are cold for example. Their body can be damaged. The spirit is also important: the psychological well-being of the couriers is very important to us. We also give all new couriers the courier *vade-mecum*.

We give them the on-boarding, a helmet, the jacket and the keys following the training session and the first 20 hours of work are on a specific shift, with special attention from the dispatcher and the godfather who accompany them.

The practice is to follow their mentor for a tour, after that the mentor follows the courier for 1 or 2 stops. After that the courier is autonomous. It is generally considered that a courier is completely autonomous (on the basics of the job) after 100 hours of work.

Discussion amongst riders is very important, we have a culture of exchange, we share techniques, for example the first to deliver in very complicated places give advice to others.

Thanks very much for your time, Théo!



Safe LMD project partners meet with Pierre Hanoune at Urbike's offices in Brussels
(Credit: Safe LMD)