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Developing Workplace Innovation Policies in the European Union

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Introduction. The Urgency of Workplace Innovation

Workplace innovation, as it developed from the beginning of this century in Europe, is a member of the Sociotechnical Systems Design (STSD) family (Mohr & Van Amelsvoort, 2016), going back to the restructuring of Europe after the Second World War, starting more or less the same policies for productivity and industrial democracy in several Western European countries. Although consensus about the definition of workplace innovation is growing worldwide, and its policy profile is getting stronger, other different policy concepts are being used to describe and implement more or less the same approach (Kesselring, Blasy, & Scoppetta, 2014). Examples include ‘innovative workplaces’ (EESC, 2011; OECD, 2010), ‘sustainable work systems’ (e.g.

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Sweden, New Zealand), ‘high involvement workplaces’, ‘high road’, ‘employee-driven innovation’ (e.g. Norway, Denmark) and ‘relational coordination’ (USA, Hoffer Gittell, 2016). Although the terminology might differ, all these approaches place a premium on employee participation and a better utilisation of the already existing human talent within organisations, primarily by (re)designing the organisation of work and tasks to enable people to be more effective and creative. Moreover, the shared objective of these approaches is to simultaneously improve the quality of working life (competence development, stress reduction) and organisational performance (productivity, quality, innovative capacity).

Workplace Innovation: Process and Outcomes

The European Workplace Innovation Network (EUWIN), started in 2013, describes workplace innovation as follows: ‘Workplace innovations describe new and combined interventions in work organisation, human resource management, labour relations and supportive technologies. It is important to recognise both process and outcomes. The term workplace innovation describes the participatory and inclusive nature of innovations that embed workplace practices grounded in continuing reflection, learning and improvements in the way in which organisations manage their employees, organise work and deploy technologies. It champions workplace cultures and processes in which productive reflection is a part of everyday working life. It builds bridges between the strategic knowledge of the leadership, the professional and tacit knowledge of frontline employees and the organisational design knowledge of experts. It seeks to engage all stakeholders in dialogue in which the force of the better argument prevails. It works towards “win-win” outcomes in which a creative convergence (rather than a trade-off) is forged between enhanced organisational performance and enhanced quality of working life’ (Dhondt, 2012, p. 2).

There is a vast body of evidence to underpin the concept (Oeij, Rus, & Pot, 2017; Osterman, 2018). However, the evidence for generalisable outcomes such as higher profits, higher wages and lower absenteeism is much thinner than that for the intermediate impacts described above. In our opinion, this thinner evidence is not a surprise because many more determinants have to be taken into account in explaining these outcomes, including markets, economic conditions, institutions, laws and regulations to mention just a few.

This clearly poses difficult methodological issues. Questions of generalisability arise because so much of the evidence comes from case studies. A second question centres on the need for adequate control data. The third concern

is that of selection (Osterman, 2018, p. 12). Quantitative research seems almost impossible because of the diversity, dynamics and different environments of organisations in any sample to be studied.

The emergence of interest in workplace innovation can be understood not by a simple linear relationship with performance but by looking at wider economic, technological and labour market developments. The broader context is that in the early 1990s, a significant shift in Europe's economy and businesses could be observed fuelled by information technology. This shift reversed the historical pattern where tangible capital was considered to be the main asset in companies. Around 1990, investments in intangible capital (in percentage of adjusted GNP) such as patents, R&D, marketing and organisational competences became higher than investments in tangible capital (Corrado & Hulten, 2010). As 'hard' technological innovations do not seem to explain persistent productivity differentials, Bloom and Van Reenen presented evidence on another possible explanation for persistent differences in productivity at the firm and the national level, namely, that such differences largely reflect variations in management practices (Bloom & Van Reenen, 2010). The OECD calls it 'knowledge-based capital' (KBC).

One conclusion of Bloom and Van Reenen is that 'There is certainly some element of contingency in management choices' (p. 221). That 'organisational choice' does exist was confirmed by Osterman's (2018) review. A further consideration regarding innovation is the growing conviction in Europe that 'social innovation' (work organisation, competence development, employee participation, etc.) is probably more important than 'technological innovation' in explaining company performance. Whereas some companies and public institutions still put their faith in technological innovation alone and focus their resources on 'digitalisation', others have come to realise the limitations of focusing blindly only on technological advancements. Organisations can only fully benefit from technological innovation if it is embedded in a proper work organisation (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014, p. 138). This context explains the need to develop and utilise the skills and competences of the present and potential workforce to increase added value as part of a competitive and knowledge-based global economy (European Commission, 2014).

Next, there is a need to enhance labour productivity to maintain our level of welfare and social security in a near future with fewer people in the workforce due to the ageing population. Finally, societal values, sometimes translated into conventions or legislation, also play a role, for example, by promoting 'decent work' or 'good jobs', enabling people to develop during working life and earn at least a 'living wage'.

Summarising these contextual issues it is clear that workplace innovation does not only address organisational performance and job quality but wider policy issues as well. However, in spite of ‘organisational choice’ and the existing evidence of positive effects, workplace innovation was not widely adopted. This growing awareness of the need for new forms of work organisation stimulated successive waves of policy intervention at the European level, described in the following section.

Modernising the Organisation of Work (1995–2010)

During the mid-1990s representatives from national programmes and initiatives mobilised an influential coalition of researchers and policymakers, resulting in the publication in 1995 of ‘Europe’s next step: organisational innovation, competition and employment’, a manifesto for the future of work organisation (Andreasen, Coriat, Den Hertog, & Kaplinsky, 1995). A seminal moment for those advocating the recognition of workplace innovation as a key dimension in EU strategy came in 1997 with the publication of the Commission’s Green (consultation) Paper ‘Partnership for a new organisation of work’: ‘The Green Paper invites the social partners and public authorities to seek to build a partnership for the development of a new framework for the modernisation of work. Such a partnership could make a significant contribution to achieving the objective of a productive, learning and participative organisation of work’ (European Commission, 1997, pp. 5–6).

Interest in work organisation as a driver for European competitiveness and quality of working life had been growing, partly fuelled by national initiatives such as those in Norway, Sweden, Ireland, France, Germany and the Netherlands. Based on the responses to this consultation, a policy document ‘Modernising the organisation of work—A positive approach to change’ was published by the European Commission in 1998 (European Commission, 1998). A substantial volume of evidence for the positive effects of new forms of work organisation was provided by the European Work and Technology Consortium (1998). Meanwhile, Eurofound conducted a large-scale research project into ‘employee participation in organisational change’ which provided again evidence for the positive relation between employee participation and organisational performance (EPOC: Eurofound, 1997).

In this first period, work organisation became a clear topic with support from the European Commission, in particular its Directorate General for

Employment (DG EMPL), albeit this support was not translated into a clear policy vision directed towards companies and national governments. Networks bringing together researchers and policymakers played an important role, including the ACTEUR Group, the European Work & Technology Consortium and the European Work Organisation Network (EWON).

The type of influence that was chosen could be called ‘soft regulation’ (invitation, stimulation, research etc.), to be distinguished from ‘hard regulation’ (legislation, directives etc.). See Table 3.1.

In 2002, a European Social Fund (ESF) programme (DG EMPL) focused on the realisation of a more flexible labour market and work organisation. One of the main areas proposed for investment was the ‘design and dissemination of innovative and productive methods of work organisation’ (EWON, 2002). Research commissioned by DG Research and Innovation showed positive results of what was called ‘the high road of work organisation’ and represented the first substantial attempt to define the concept of ‘workplace innovation’ (Totterdill, Dhondt, & Milsome, 2002). There are instances in Finland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Sweden where these reports have been used as a foundation for national programmes or initiatives.

In 2004, facilitated by the 6th EU Framework Programme ERA-NET, the ‘Work-In-Net’ consortium (2004–2010) coordinated research in the field of ‘Innovation of Work Organisation’ (Alasoini, Ramstad, Hanhike, & Lahtonen, 2005; WIN, 2010). In the same period, the Employee-driven innovation (EDI) network was established, in particular by the Norwegian and Danish trade union confederations and researchers in the field of work organisation (Høytrup, Bonnafous-Boucher, Hasse, Lotz, & Møller, 2012).

Table 3.1 Policy options in the promotion of workplace innovation

<i>Hard/indirect regulation</i> Directives or binding rules which focus indirectly on workplace innovation through some other policy area (e.g. product market, labour market or occupational safety and health)	<i>Hard/direct regulation</i> Directives or binding rules which focus directly on workplace innovation (e.g. work-related, organisational or management practices)	
<i>Soft/indirect regulation</i> General policy frameworks and recommendations, conferences, ‘good practice’ guides, etc.	<i>Soft/meso-level regulation</i> Educational and training programmes, coaching, research, learning networks, etc.	<i>Soft/direct regulation</i> Subsidised consultancy, development and action-oriented research projects, tax credits, etc.

Source: Alasoini, Ramstad, & Totterdill, 2017, p. 29.

Since the EU's Lisbon Growth and Jobs Strategy in 2000, the European Employment Strategy's overarching objectives have encompassed not only full employment but also the promotion of quality and productivity at work. In the European Commission (2003), the 'design and dissemination of innovative and sustainable forms of work organisation' continued to be cited as a means of enhancing productivity, responsiveness and quality, as well as improving working life and the retention on the labour market of older employees.

Member States with a tradition of policies and programmes focused on workplace innovation such as those in the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, France and Germany continued to deliver such programmes; countries with no such tradition (e.g. Greece: Ioannou, 2006) continued by and large to ignore workplace innovation.

This lack of tradition was also the case in the 'new' EU Member States. For some of them, notably the former socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, implementing workplace innovation is even more difficult because they have another tradition in which concepts such as productivity, industrial democracy and social dialogue had different meanings than comparable concepts in Western Europe. In the 1980s, Central and Eastern European countries became familiar with the Japanese style of management and work organisation as most established productivity centres with Japanese aid funds and Japanese consultants (viz. Japanese ex-managers in their 'second career'). These centres were connected to Western European centres through their membership of the European Association of National Productivity Centres (EANPC). The EANPC (2005) promotes not only productivity but an integrated approach with quality of working life and sustainability. After these countries had entered the European Union, Japanese aid was discontinued.

Even in the Nordic countries, implementing workplace innovation was not a matter of course; in Sweden the programmes and research were partly discontinued by the new centre-right government in 2006 (Sandberg, 2013).

The outcome of this period is a European policy pattern that has remained largely fragmented: a series of separate EU policy fields such as competitiveness, innovation, employment, health and safety and social inclusion that add up to less than the sum of the parts.

Adoption of Workplace Innovation in EU Policy (2011–2016)

The formulation of the EU's Europe 2020 vision and strategy during 2009–2010 (European Commission, 2010) provided an important opportunity for European policymakers to learn from evidence of how innovation in working practices can address economic and social priorities and translate this into policies. Key influences on the European Commission included a 2011 Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC—an advisory forum representing employers' associations, trade unions and NGOs) on 'Innovative workplaces as a source of productivity and quality jobs' (EESC, 2011) and the 'Dortmund-Brussels Position Paper' (Dortmund-Brussels Position Paper, 2012) signed by more than 30 experts and practitioners across the EU, both calling for more proactive interventions by the European Commission. DG Enterprise and Industry (ENTR) reacted to this Position Paper by organising a set of meetings to understand what they could do. After DG EMPL had been in the lead since the mid-1990s, the initiative was taken now by DG Enterprise and Industry (DG ENTR), related to industrial and innovation policy.

In 2012 DG ENTR adopted workplace innovation in its industrial and innovation policy and decided to support and fund a European Workplace Innovation Network (EUWIN) for four years, embracing all 27 EU Member States, EU candidate countries, Switzerland and Norway. EUWIN was designed to exchange good practices and establish 'workplace innovation alliances' of employers' associations, trade unions, governments and knowledge institutes.

According to DG Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW, the former DG ENTR) workplace innovation improves motivation and working conditions for employees, which leads to increased labour productivity, innovation capability, market resilience and overall business competitiveness. All enterprises, no matter their size, can benefit from workplace innovation, states DG GROW. It improves performance and working lives, encourages creativity of employees through positive organisational changes, combines leadership with hands-on, practical knowledge of frontline employees and engages all stakeholders in the process of change. This policy is also part of the 'Advanced Manufacturing Programme' (ADMA): 'Workplace innovation has to provide advanced solutions for manufacturing industry, based on the newest technologies' (European Commission, 2014, pp. 27–28).

In the words of DG EMPL: ‘With the Europe 2020 Strategy it also became a priority to support workplace innovation aimed at improving staff motivation and working conditions with a view to enhancing the EU’s innovation capability, labour productivity and organisational performance’ (European Commission, 2015, pp. 169–70). One of the paragraph titles is ‘Complementing technological innovation with workplace innovation’ (p. 164).

European agencies supporting the policies of DG EMPL continued to supply new ideas and policy recommendations. Eurofound already organised the first seminar on workplace innovation in 2005 and developed the concept over the years in their European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS; Eurofound, 2012; Eurofound, 2016) and the European Company Survey (ECS; Eurofound, 2015). Core indicators are decision latitude and organisational participation. The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work connected workplace innovation to ‘well-being at work’ in both the research and policies priorities of occupational safety and health (EU-OSHA, 2013a, 2013b).

All these activities have helped the concept of workplace innovation to gain a higher policy profile with other EU institutions. The policy concept of workplace innovation was also used by the European Parliament (2013) and IndustriAll European Trade Union (IndustriAll European Trade Union, 2014) in their programmes for an industrial renaissance, as well as in national initiatives in Ireland and the UK, and in the translations of this concept into national programmes in other European countries (Alasoini et al., 2017). Outside Europe the concept is being used as well, for example, in the USA (e.g. Black & Lynch, 2003) and Australia (e.g. McMurray & Dorai, 2003).

Policies of work organisation and workplace innovation have never resulted in legislation or regulations at EU level. Mentioning the issue in the Employment Guidelines, which in effect have a purely advisory status for EU Member States, did not seem to help much nor did the evidence from the effective national legislation that exists in a small minority of Member States. Probably workplace innovation is not suitable for a regulatory approach, because its implementation depends very much on the social dialogue at European, national, sectoral and organisation levels. Furthermore, there is a strong feeling amongst policymakers that they should not interfere in company policies.

Nonetheless EU, national and regional authorities can stimulate dialogue and develop campaigns for knowledge dissemination and capacity building, described by Alasoini (2016, pp. 20–23) as ‘soft regulation’ compared to ‘hard regulation’ (legislation). Some of these authorities stimulated and resourced

workplace innovation at enterprise level, but unfortunately only for a short period of time in Ireland, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium (Flanders) and Portugal. France, Germany and Finland (Alasoini, 2016) are the exceptions, with programmes that have been renewed several times over the past decades. New ongoing programmes have been developed in Basque Country (Spain) and Scotland (UK) (Alasoini et al., 2017).

In the lobbying for and development of these policies, an important role has always been played by researchers and their networks. Policies were developed bottom-up by coalitions of European Commission officials and researchers who organised seminars, meetings and workshops to convince the Commission's Directors, Directors-General and finally EU Commissioners. Sometimes a few representatives of trade unions and/or employers' associations were also active in these networks. These coalitions have appeared to be successful in helping to put workplace innovation higher on the political agenda.

Complementing Technological Innovation with Workplace Innovation (2017 and Beyond)

In the present times all the reasons for workplace innovation mentioned in paragraph 1 are still relevant. However, policymakers also see the rise of digital technologies as setting a new policy scene for the workplace (Oeij, Rus, Dhondt, & Van Hootegeem, 2019). The world has been muddling through several disruptive technological breakthroughs for some time now. Robotics, artificial intelligence and machine learning could fundamentally change the nature of work and impact the future viability of organisations as well as that of the general societal fabric. The debates on digital transformation and the future of work reveal new risks and opportunities. These risks and opportunities cannot be solved by technology alone.

Workplace innovation remains the main solution for organisations to stimulate the use of new technology (Putnik, Oeij, Dhondt, Van der Torre, & De Vroome, 2019) and to deal with the risks. Will part of the workforce be left behind or will everybody acquire new skills? Can we create more high-quality jobs or will the polarisation of jobs become even stronger? We suggest that workplace innovation is able to contribute to positive solutions. Being aware of 'organisational choice', managers can actively choose to take workplace innovation as a departure point for innovation. But in spite of the benefits, this strategy is not self-evident. Rodrik and Sabel (2019) argue that the

shortfall in ‘good jobs’ can be viewed as a massive market failure—a kind of gross economic malfunction, and not just a source of inequality and economic exclusion. They make the case that this problem cannot be dealt with standard regulatory instruments. Binding agreements between companies, social partners and governments are necessary to start a ‘good jobs’ industrial policy, and they formulate the conditions for a different interplay of public policy, social partners and scientific communities. This new approach could send a message to the new European Commissioners—installed end of 2019—to keep workplace innovation in their industrial and innovation policy and stimulate social dialogue to prepare such agreements.

Recently the EESC published a new ‘Own-Initiative Opinion’ on ‘Social Dialogue for Innovation in the Digital Economy’. One of the recommendations is to continue promoting workplace innovation: ‘At national level initiatives by social partners to enhance the productivity and well-being of workers at workplace level are a promising method, that should be promoted in a wider European context. In this regard the EESC welcomes the initiatives and research of Eurofound and the European Workplace Innovation Network and proposes that the EU take action to develop the dialogue between social partners and other stakeholders in the context of participative approaches to promote workplace innovation’ (EESC, 2019, p. 4).

The European Commission established the ‘Industry 2030 High-Level Industrial Roundtable’ with 8 independent experts and 12 representatives of employers’ associations and trade unions. In their vision they agreed on social dialogue, innovative jobs, human-centred design of technology and investing in new skills. One of the recommendations for building an enabling environment for more sustainable business activities is: ‘Promote the development of workplace innovation and other modern practices, which influence both well-being and economic performance of companies’ (Industry 2030 High-Level Industrial Roundtable, 2019, p. 35).

In another publication, DG EMPL concluded this as well: ‘Robust economic expansion in the EU cannot be sustained without higher total factor productivity growth, which relies more on the efficient use of productive factors, rather than just expanding their use. Total factor productivity thrives in Member States and regions with strong labour market institutions and in firms that invest in workers’ training and innovative capital and processes. Policies that help to develop human capital and facilitate workplace innovation are most effective in increasing productivity in the long term, provided labour markets do not discriminate and firms can access the necessary capital’ (European Commission, 2019a, p. 28).

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work published a study, *Foresight on new and emerging occupational safety and health risks associated with digitalisation by 2025* (EU-OSHA, 2018) in which workplace innovation is used as an option to construct scenarios. In a recent Discussion Paper EU-OSHA uses the concept of ‘social innovation in the workplace’, meaning non-technical innovations that emphasise good quality jobs and employee participation. The argument is that the fourth industrial revolution should go together with social innovation in the workplace (EU-OSHA, 2019).

These high-level recommendations seem to reflect high levels of agreement about the positive impact of workplace innovation. However, the transposition of these recommendations to EU and national policies is not that self-evident. In particular the employers’ representatives emphasise that work organisation and technology is their prerogative and responsibility. They decide when and how workers will be involved. No need for arrangements with trade unions and/or governments. Conducting research and training consultants is not seen as a priority issue. If joint programmes of social partners and governments are not feasible (at the moment), government initiatives seem obvious. Good examples include current programmes in France, Germany, Finland, the Basque Country and Scotland.

The lobbying continues, and workplace innovation’s applied and action research community again has to draw its own plan. This is being achieved by revitalising EUWIN, this time without funding by the European Commission but with financial and in-kind contributions of—at the start—19 partners from 12 European countries. Current plans, co-ordinated by the HIVA Research Institute at the University of Leuven, include a programme of international events and the relaunch of a definitive Workplace Innovation Knowledge Bank, bulletin and social media campaign (led by Workplace Innovation Europe CLG).

Conclusions

For the European Commission, all these high-level recommendations are an extra reason to continue the policy of supporting workplace innovation. Workplace innovation could be easily integrated in EU policy agendas such as innovation, new skills, ‘more and better jobs’ and ‘social dialogue’. On its innovation web page DG GROW refers to ‘key enabling technologies, such as workplace innovation’ (DG GROW, 2019). DG EMPL is in the lead of the ‘New Start for Social Dialogue’. Obviously these policies should be extended

to and embedded in broader policies of public interest such as social equality, social empathy, peace and the environment (André, 2019).

There is room for improvement. In the European Working Conditions Survey 2015, one question was: 'Are you involved in improving the work organisation or work processes of the department or organisation?' Of the responding employees in the EU-27 countries, 50% answered 'always' or 'most of the time'. More or less the same percentage responded positive to questions about 'involvement in target setting' and 'ability to influence decisions that are important for one's work' (Eurofound, 2016).

For a number of reasons many enterprises, hospitals and government departments, for example, do not implement workplace innovation as a matter of course, in spite of the obvious benefits for employees and employers (Dhondt, Vermeerbergen, & Van Hootegem, 2017, pp. 90–91). Recently several scientists from the USA emphasised the importance of the socio-economic system. The 'massive market failure', as Rodrik and Sabel call it, to create a 'good jobs economy' should be compensated by a better coordinated policy and more action by governments, social partners and research institutes. Osterman (2018, p. 25) argued 'that adoption of specific internal labor market practices is the result of a political contest within organizations in which groups advocate for policies that are in their self-interest. The impact of these groups is shaped by their power within the firm, by the needs of the firm and its competitive environment, and also by resources, regulatory and legal, that are provided by the external environment'. To support a 'good jobs economy', the development of 'countervailing power, or, to put it bluntly, coercion' (p. 27) is needed if creating a supportive environment that helps sustain stakeholder behaviour (soft regulation) is not enough. Trade unions, shareholders with broader goals for their investments, governments and the general public (values) could play their part in both strategies.

The emphasis on job quality is also supported by the MIT Task Force on the Future of Work: 'We must first understand that today's challenge, and likely tomorrow's, is *not* too few jobs. Instead, it is the quality and accessibility of the jobs that will exist and the career trajectories they will offer to workers, particularly to those with less education. Addressing this challenge means channeling technological progress and accompanying productivity growth into a strong labor market that delivers broadly distributed income growth and economic security, as occurred in the decades after World War II' (Autor, Mindell, & Reynolds, 2019, p. 46). The importance of job quality is also underlined in the conclusions of the evaluation of the Europe 2020 Strategy: the employment policy was rather successful but 'cannot encompass all the aspects of the changing workplace, in which the quality of jobs matters as

much as their availability. In the future, greater attention should be given to the aspect of the quality of work' (European Commission, 2019b, p. 7).

Although the situation in Europe is slightly better than in the USA due to the social economy that dominates in Europe, the debate on proper policies continues. In Europe workplace innovation is considered not appropriate for hard/direct regulation. But the market failure is also visible in EU countries. Workplace innovation is still not widespread and the number of precarious and non-standard jobs has been increasing due to the economic crisis and new technologies. This is why the European Commission came forward in 2017 with the European Pillar of Social Rights, covering 20 rights in the fields of (a) equal opportunities and access to the labour market, (b) fair working conditions and (c) social protection and inclusion (European Commission, 2017). Governments and social partners are encouraged by the European Commission to apply these rights through social dialogue, but legislation is not excluded. Additionally it would not be surprising to see more workers and trade unions engage in industrial action and legal procedures.

EU and national authorities have shown that they can successfully stimulate social dialogue and develop campaigns for knowledge dissemination and capacity building. However persistent endeavours are needed, and it's a challenge to extend these programmes to European countries with less tradition and experience. An important trigger is that the highest benefits from new technologies can be obtained by complementing them with proper workplace innovation. Besides a better economic performance, this will create a good jobs economy as well.

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