

# Is workplace innovation an unnecessary luxury during the COVID-19 pandemic?

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## Introduction

Workplace innovation is aimed at strengthening the input of employees in decision-making within organisations and companies. It is not just a bonus for the employee, workplace innovation is needed to increase the innovative capacity of companies. It is win-win. Workplace innovation is aimed at a broad set of organisational measures: strengthening the individual employee (more opportunities to contribute ideas and develop knowledge); at better relations in the organisation, encouraging and enabling employees to identify with the company and contribute to decision-making; and at shaping and developing forms of working (such as self-managed teams) in order to strengthen the organisation. But does workplace innovation still make sense in a crisis such as the COVID- 19 pandemic? Is it still relevant for companies?

## Which part of the economy is rising in the background?

COVID19 ensures that many companies are now fully focused on a survival strategy. "Cash is king", is the blessed expression that now guides the behaviour of business managers. Payment of bills is delayed. Investments are postponed. All temporary employees are suspended. An unintended consequence in these months is that many small companies, in particular, will suffocate as their work dries up and invoices remain unpaid for extended periods.

We all understand that within the COVID- 19 pandemic we need to give priority to our own health and that of our fellow citizens. We are all rightly concerned about our elderly relatives. We all want to prevent the intensive care units in hospitals from becoming overcrowded. In the impossible choice between health and economy, we now choose health. But our choice has its limits.

We are already seeing a huge economic cost in many countries without moving a single yard towards improving our health situation. In a month and a half not even a couple of percent of the population in our countries have become ill. But we still have high numbers of deaths. Building up group immunity, if that is the hoped-for strategy by our policymakers, would require us to endure the lockdown for tens of months to control inflow to the ICUs. If that is the option our politicians are aiming for, then it is clear that economic death is a far greater risk for many of us than that of fatality from COVID- 19.

Let's turn this discussion around. One way or another, we will have to kickstart an economy in which we learn to live with the virus until a vaccine is available (and probably even after that). And we'll undoubtedly have to deal with new pandemics in the not very distant future.

We are already learning new behaviours. Where we used to stumble over each other when we went to the supermarket, now we all neatly take our places in long queues at the checkout. It all takes a bit longer, but we all support these new forms of collaboration in our daily activities.

## European Workplace Innovation Network (EUWIN)

We will have to develop new behaviours in all areas of our economic activity. We will have to renew all our existing production and service methods. We will have to innovate. Whoever does it first, benefits the most. The lockdown hinders our actions, but not our thinking and future-planning.

**If we want to survive, we have to think today about how we can organise our work better and differently tomorrow.**

### European Workplace Innovation Network (EUWIN)

EUWIN was established by the European Commission in 2013 and is now entirely supported by contributions from an international network of partners co-ordinated by HIVA (University of Leuven). EUWIN also functions as a network partner for the H2020 *Beyond4.0* project.

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