

Workplace innovation's spillover into community and political participation

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Is it true that a discontented worker is a discontented citizen? Does job quality make a difference in terms of participation in the neighbourhood and in politics? Well, looking at recent research the answer to both questions is “yes”, although work and employment are of course not the only determinants of community and political behaviour.

We've known for a long time already that work and employment contribute to attitudes, behaviours and even personality. Adam Smith (1767, p. 603) described how machines and division of labour made higher productivity and wealth of nations possible but at the expense of the intellectual, social and martial virtues of the labouring poor. For Karl Marx (1867, p. 60) 'the process of production of capital' shapes the characters of capitalist and worker and their adversarial relationship. Max Weber (1921, p. 998) showed how bureaucracy produced the professional expert as well as the obedient civil servant. In this essay, I'd like to focus on the spill-over of job quality, in particular job content and labour relations.

The questions posed above are even more interesting because workplace innovation aims and claims to contribute to the wider society, and to create systemic preconditions for democracy and dialogical development (Mohr & Van Amelsvoort, 2016; Johnsen, Hildebrandt, Aslaksen, Ennals, & Knudsen, 2021).

Two classic examples of such research are from Lipsitz and Karasek. Lipsitz (1964, p. 951) concluded that “assembly-line workers are found to be more fatalistic, more punitive, and more politically radical than other workers of comparable salary and education who work in the same plant.” Another concrete example is the research that Robert Karasek presented in 1978 at the World Congress of Sociology in Uppsala. He followed 1508 male Swedish workers between 1968 and 1974. People with an 'active job' (high job demands and many control options) during that period became more active in both the political and the leisure environment such as the neighbourhood than people with 'passive jobs' (low job demands, few control options) (Karasek, 2004).

Labour relations and populist attitudes

In an ongoing research programme by Agnes Akkerman at Radboud University the question is also reversed: "A discontented employee, a discontented citizen?" (Akkerman, 2017). Recent research in that programme shows that workers who raise issues with their supervisor and experience negative responses are more likely to adopt a populist attitude and vote than workers who receive positive responses in such cases. Negative reactions reinforce the feeling of a strong division between good workers and crooked bosses (Stanojevic, Akkerman, & Manevska, 2020). The authors consider it

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possible that developments in the labour market (flexibilisation, platformisation) lead to supervisors reacting negatively more often.

This result is reminiscent of the perceived separation between the people and the elite at the macro level. Labour also plays a role in this perception, albeit not the only one. The combination of neoliberalism (belief in the market mechanism) and meritocracy (so-called equal opportunities for people with unequal starting positions and talents) has led to greater social inequality and contributed to Brexit and the election of Trump (Sandel, 2020).

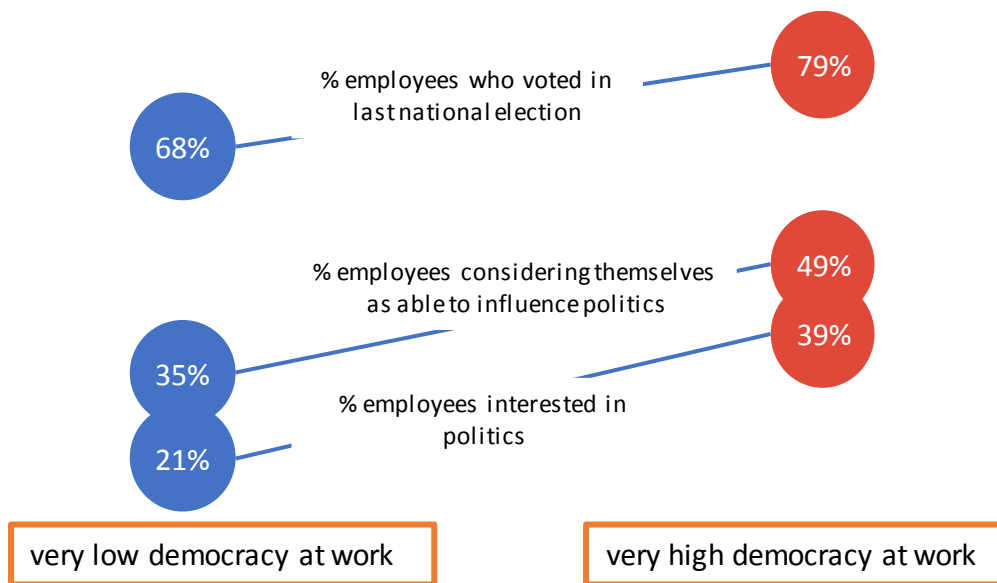
That is not new. In 1968, when Nixon was elected, many young people with 'unskilled work' voted for the Southern law and order conservative candidate Wallace. According to Ulbo de Sitter, there was active alienation, arising from a discrepancy between the increased level of education and the 'unskilled work' (De Sitter, 1981, p. 153). At the same time, Carole Pateman (1970) criticised the view that the power of the elite could be justified by the perceived political apathy and incompetence of the many. In her opinion this is circular reasoning: by not giving the masses a say and autonomy, political action and competence development are hindered.

Another study from the same Radboud University programme also shows interesting differences. Workers who raise an issue and receive support from their supervisor are more likely to vote and become active in a party. The mechanism is that this support reinforces the feeling that one can influence decision-making by taking action ('political efficacy', taken from Patemen, 1970). Workers who experience opposition are more likely to resort to protest activities (Geurkink, Akkerman, & Sluiter, 2020).

Job quality and political participation

A somewhat older study by Godard among Canadian and British workers shows that 'good work' produces 11 percent more voters and 53 percent more people who are socially and politically active. Task content and procedures for fair treatment appeared especially to have a positive effect. Job satisfaction had a negative effect (Godard, 2007). This effect of job satisfaction is not surprising because general job satisfaction measures only the degree of adaptation to the situation. It is remarkable that the difference of 11 percent is precisely reflected about ten years later in a study by the European Trade Union Institute with data from the European Social Survey 2016 (De Spiegelaere, Hoffmann, Jagodziński, Lafuente Hernández, Rasnača, & Vitols, 2019).

See Figure 1: (next page).



Source: European Social Survey 2016 (ESS 2016). Democracy at work scale based on mean scores of wkdcorga (allowed to decide how daily work is organised) and iorgact (allowed to influence policy decisions about activities of organisation). Reported differences between mean score less than 2.5 and more than 7.5 on a scale of 0 to 10. 'Ability to influence politics' based on psppsgva cumulating the responses 'completely', 'very' and 'quite'. 'Interested in politics' based on polintr, cumulating the responses of 'very' and 'quite'.

Figure 1. Democracy at work and civic democracy (De Spiegelaere et al., 2019, p. 72).

Timming and Summers (2020) were able to use data from the European Social Survey 2010 to confirm their hypothesis - that being able to participate in decisions about work matters leads to more interest in politics and more confidence in political institutions. These relationships are more robust with union members than with non-union members. The European Social Surveys 2010 and 2011 were used by Budd, Lamare and Timming (2018) to also look at the effect of being able to participate in decision-making about work matters on actual political behaviour (voting, member of a party or action group, signing a petition, etc.) and possible differences between countries. Indeed, this relationship with political behaviour appeared again independent of union membership. It was unexpected that the effects found were not mainly caused by data from Western European countries. The relationship also proved to be robust in countries with few political parties and a shorter democratic tradition. Given the recent political developments in European countries, a comparison with previous research and a comparison between countries would be interesting.

Finally, a few special results of research are of interest. Eldor and colleagues conducted a somewhat smaller survey of workers from private and public organisations in Israel. They conclude that a positive attitude at work (work engagement) is associated with more community involvement. This association was stronger among those in the public sector than among those in the private sector (Eldor, Harpaz, & Westman, 2020). Wu and Paluck (2020) conducted experiments in Chinese factories and at an American university. For six weeks work meetings were held, 20 minutes a week, during which the boss had to stay in the background and workers discussed problems and performance goals. The reported results are surprising, also to the researchers, given the short period of the experiments and given the authoritarian relationships that prevail in China. The participating workers in both countries scored lower on the authoritarian personality scale after the

experiment, had become more critical of authorities at work and in society, and were more willing to participate actively in social and political activities and in family decisions.

Research design: behaviour and structure

The attitude and behaviour of workers and supervisors (participation in decision-making, whether or not to raise issues, to support or not to support) and feelings (of effectiveness) are of course strongly determined by the tasks that someone has (work organisation), the authority that someone has been assigned (management structure) and the employment relationship (contract and the associated social relationships). This is actually described in all the publications mentioned when discussing existing theories. Karasek has recently also expanded his theory from task level to the organisational level (Karasek, 2020). Yet the research itself is often only about attitudes, behaviour and feelings and the outcomes are rarely explained in relation to work organisation, management structure and the employment relationship.

Godard (2014) and Budd (2020) even warn against a 'psychologisation' of HRM and the employment relationship respectively. We have seen this happen before in the research on work-related stress that has shifted to different ways of coping with stress rather than measures to reduce structural risks in the work situation. Of course individual and subjective factors play a role, but they do not make up the whole story. Kitschelt and Rehm (2014), for example, discuss the likelihood that personality factors play a role in what work people end up in. However, they argue that, to understand ideological preferences, we also need to investigate the influence of task structure and hierarchical relationships. They demonstrate that this relationship exists based on data from the European Social Survey of 2008.

Conclusions: research and policy

This essay deals only with the main results of research and is not a meta-study. Incidentally, such a study would be extremely difficult to do because all authors choose their own hypotheses and variables, despite the overlap in content. Little or no accumulation of knowledge is visible, even though each author claims to have done something special. Nevertheless, it is pleasant to conclude that recent research confirms it is very plausible that 'good work' leads to more interest in community work and political activities. It has also been made plausible that bad experiences with supervisors increase susceptibility to populism. In other words: workplace innovation has spill-over effects onto social innovation in general (Dhondt, Oeij, & Pot, forthcoming).

Remarkably, the authors are scanty with policy recommendations, while their results are an open door for strengthening the democracy we know in society in organisations as well. Unsurprisingly, the people of the European Trade Union Institute are an exception to this. They argue for an extension of democratic rights at work. Agnes Akkerman wants to set up empowerment training courses for workers based on the results of her research programme. According to her, this is also in the interest of the organisations. That is certainly a relevant initiative. I assume that the ultimate focus is broader than organisational behaviour. After all, we have read in the cited literature that it mainly concerns a work organisation with 'active jobs', a management structure with participatory decision-making and an employment relationship with rights and security. Organisations that achieve these organisational goals not only promote activities outside of work, but also achieve

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smaller stress risks, competence development, higher labour productivity and a greater innovative capacity of the organisation. The most recent European Company Survey has again convincingly demonstrated this (Eurofound & Cedefop, 2020).

The aforementioned spill-over effects are therefore a compelling additional reason for advocating workplace innovation.

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