

## Business as Unusual?

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Before the COVID-19 pandemic there were already many discussions about the future of work in times of digital transformation. The COVID-19 crisis has further fuelled these discussions since it placed extraordinary pressure on organisations to keep their businesses afloat. Many of them are now fully focused on a survival strategy, but companies and trade unions will need to move beyond firefighting interventions. This is a unique opportunity to take a long, hard look at organisations, and to engage workforces in reinventing dysfunctional ways of working. Especially since workplace innovation can play a key role in shaping a sustainable future of work.

The 2019 European Company Survey (ECS)<sup>1</sup> has uncovered combinations of workplace practices that create win-win outcomes for both the workers and businesses. In particular, establishments where workers have a high degree of autonomy, where management has high expectations of them, where training and learning opportunities are widespread, and where workers are directly involved in decision-making, are most likely to lead to win-win situations. Data from the 2019 ECS survey further highlights that employee representation fosters workplace practices that have been associated with improved workers' well-being and establishment performance. This research confirms the important role of both workplace practices and human-centred workplace innovation, and of employee representation. These were also the core topics of a recent seminar on workplace innovation.

### Seminar

On October 21, 2021 a seminar was held on the topic: *“Business as unusual? Exploring the role of workplace innovation practices for shaping a sustainable future of work in the aftermath of a pandemic crisis”*. The conference was organised by HIVA-KU Leuven on behalf of and in collaboration with the European Centre for Workers' Questions (EZA), with the financial support of the European Commission. The event was held in-person in Brussels, given the more moderate COVID-19 measures at the time, and it was attended by representatives of 12 different countries. Key objectives of the seminar were: (1) To address the impact of COVID-19 on organisations, workplaces and social dialogue in times of digital transformation; (2) To discuss the potential role of workplace innovation practices in shaping the post-pandemic future of work; (3) To identify best practice examples of workplace innovation with a prominent and active place for social dialogue, whilst taking into consideration the diversity in employment and industrial relations regimes in the EU.

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**Dr. Ezra Dessers** chaired the seminar, and welcomed the participants to Brussels. Next up was guest speaker, **Prof. Geert Van Hootegem**, who gave a keynote speech on workplace innovation during and after the COVID-19 crisis. The seminar continued with a combination of expert presentations and group discussion rounds, led by **Dr. Milou Habraken**. In the morning, we had expert presentations by **Prof. Steven Dhondt**, **Dr. Egoitz Pomares** and **Prof. Vassil Kirov**, followed by a group discussion round focused on workplace innovation practices and coalitions. In the afternoon expert presentations were given by **Dr. Majda Seghir** and **Dr. Ralf Kopp**. The group discussion focused on social dialogue and whether business as unusual will become the new normal. The plenary, closing discussion, was led by Dr. Karolien Lenaerts. During the coffee and lunch breaks, participants, speakers and organisers were able to continue discussions and exchange information on an informal basis.

## Presentations

**Prof. Geert Van Hootegem**, General Director of HIVA-KU Leuven (Belgium), made a substantiated plea to consolidate the positive changes in the organisation of work (in terms of increased autonomy, blurring of silos). He indicated that bureaucracy is already returning, and called on unions to not only preserve the realisations of the past, but also to actively invest in workplace innovation practices.

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**Prof. Steven Dhondt**, Senior Scientist at TNO (Netherlands) and Guest Professor at KU Leuven explained how we can measure workplace innovation, and make comparisons between different countries and companies. He showed that different levels of workplace innovation relate to different levels of readiness for crisis, and to a different approach of companies towards their employees.

**Dr. Egoitz Pomares**, Researcher at Sinergiak, University of the Basque Country (Spain), talked about essential aspects of the design of innovation programmes as a way to establish frameworks for action in order to promote the adoption of workplace innovation practices by companies and their employees. He showed that hard regulation (e.g. laws) is rare in this domain, and that mainly soft regulation (e.g. action plans) is important.

**Prof. Vassil Kirov**, IPS - Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (Bulgaria) did a talk on the ICT ecosystem in Sofia. He introduced an ecosystem perspective to analyse, interpret and explain how digital transformation in industry and services has taken shape at the regional level. He indicated a lack of formal arenas for the negotiation and dialogue about new practices and needs in times of COVID-19 and beyond.

**Dr. Majda Seghir**, Centre d'études de l'emploi et du travail, Le CNAM (France) presented an EU scoreboard on employee involvement, technological and organisational changes. She illustrated the use of combined data on employers and employees in assessing the links between technological and organisational changes (measured from the employer side) and employee involvement (measured from the employee side).

**Dr. Ralf Kopp**, Social Research Center, TU Dortmund (Germany), talked about the age of uncertainty as challenge for leadership and labour policy. He argued that participation and empowerment often go hand in hand with new forms of systemic governance, and alignment through use of concepts of positive psychology. Participation and empowerment appear as a substitute for an expanded democratisation. Using participation and empowerment as a driver for more democratisation of work life means to go a decisive step further.

## Conclusions

Workplace innovation has played a key role in addressing the challenges related to COVID-19, and the transformation processes that were already ongoing, and have been accelerating due to the pandemic. Those workplace innovations that have proven their effectiveness during the pandemic should now be continued, but more research is needed to better separate what practices work from those that do not. Workplace innovation requires a conducive context. This applies to both the types of measures set up to support it – hard (laws, collective agreements) as well as soft instruments – and the ecosystem of actors or the coalitions involved in it. Trade unions play a critical role, but also workers themselves and managers. The incentives to foster more inclusive workplaces and to have workers involved in making decisions is an advantage for all. The different actors should be recognised as key players, and a continuous dialogue between them should be fostered. This will result in win-win situations.

**To this end all actors should be empowered, requiring capacity building covering all workers and all forms of work.**

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