

Workplace Innovation

How does it link to different scientific literatures?

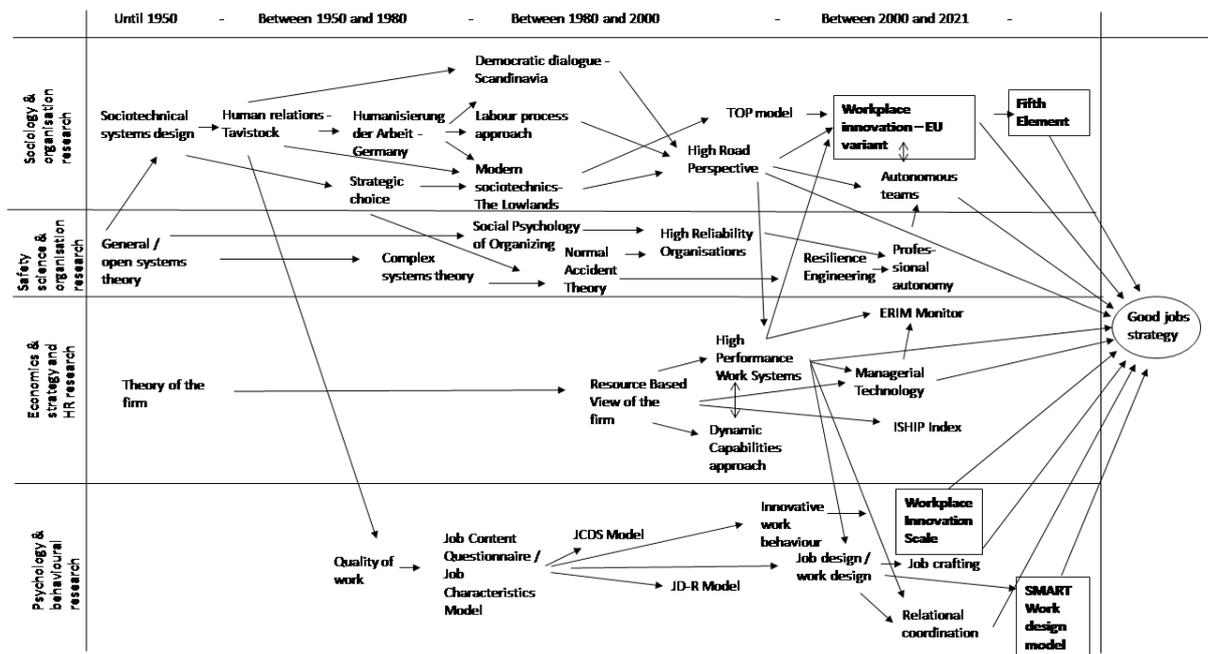


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Workplace innovation (WPI) has many definitions, but what they have in common is being a driver for the ‘advancement of work’ and contributing to a ‘good jobs strategy’. Or put simply: better jobs. Recently, we ploughed through all the publications we could find on workplace innovation: more than 170! Not only scientific journal articles but also grey literature and several websites. We noticed that several scientific streams pay attention to ‘better jobs’ and ‘good work’. In this contribution we share our observations about four social scientific research streams with ‘work’ as a central theme, namely sociology and organisation research, safety science and organisation research, economic strategy and human resources research, and psychology and behavioural research. Whether we see convergence or divergence between those streams is a question we had in mind. The scheme presents the research streams connected to workplace innovation and a good jobs strategy in a historical time perspective. Further, there are four WPI approaches indicated in a box that we shall shortly stipulate.

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The first row ‘**Sociology & Organisation Research**’ goes back to Socio-Technical Systems Design that stresses the joint optimization of the social and technical system for success, in conjunction with the presence of (semi-autonomous) team-based work. From there arrows go over to Human Relations, Humanisierung der Arbeit (Humanisation of work), Strategic Choice, and from there to Democratic Dialogue and Modern Sociotechnics. Subsequently, arrows are going to the High-Road perspective, eventually feeding into the EU variant of workplace innovation. What these approaches have in common is the weight put on a skilled workforce with decent jobs as a driver for innovation and performance. The *EU variant of workplace innovation* stresses a combination of economic and social goals as in the European Social Model. The variant of workplace innovation proposed by EUWIN is *The Fifth Element* approach, which identifies four bundles (or ‘Elements’) of working practices, namely: 1] Jobs, Teams & Technology; 2] Employee-Driven Innovation & Improvement; 3] Organisational Structures, Management and Procedures, and 4] Co-Created Leadership & Employee Voice. Alignment between these Elements creates a synergy in the form of the ‘Fifth Element’, a system of mutually interdependent parts that leads to a sustainable culture of innovation and empowerment embedded throughout the organisation. The purpose

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of both WPI approaches is to achieve win-win outcomes for organisations and their employees. This then links with an arrow to the 'Good job strategy'.

The second row, '**Safety Science & Organisation Research**', takes another route. The start, as in the former row, is the Open Systems theory. This connects to the theory of Complex Systems and the complexity view of the Social Psychology of Organising, and the Normal Accident theory. From there arrows go over into High Reliability Organising and Resilience Engineering. Both theories build on the need of professionals to deal with risks in a non-standard manner because these professionals must find solutions for problems that are difficult to predict and, therefore, very hard to handle. For this reason, professional autonomy is indispensable and that requires a design of jobs and teams to operate highly autonomously. Although the term workplace innovation is not used in this context, this type of work must take human needs into account to enable professionals to operate flawlessly under tiring conditions. To attract highly qualified staff, it makes sense to follow a good jobs strategy.

The third row '**Economics & Strategy and HR Research**' has a focus on the effects of HR-bundles and intangibles of organisational performance. The Resource-Based View of the firm (RBV), stemming itself from the Theory of the Firm, studies the strategic resources a firm can exploit to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. The RBV focuses managerial attention on the firm's internal resources to identify those assets, capabilities, and competencies with the potential to deliver superior competitive advantages. In a similar vein, the theory of Dynamic Capability is about the capability of an organisation to purposefully adapt an organisation's resource base. Both theories have inspired developers of the High Performance Work Systems (HPWS) theory, studying which elements of 'HR-systems, bundles and measures' contribute to a firm's competitive advantage. On the one hand, the elements of high-involvement and high-commitment of employees, part of the HPWS concept, fed into the workplace innovation concepts applied by EU researchers (see first row 'Sociology & Organisation Research'). On the other hand, it nourished economic and strategic research that

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investigated the effect of intangibles on business performance, such as studies into managerial technology, which states that some aspects of management are considered as a technology or “best practice”, and that adopting organisational best practices would improve productivity. In this stream there is more attention for economic goals than for a good jobs strategy.

The fourth row ‘**Psychology & Behavioural Research**’ has its focus on individual and group or team behaviour. The basis is the experiences of the Human Relations school and the Quality of Work movement. Job Characteristics Theory is a work design theory, and it provides core characteristics for enriching jobs in organisational settings, namely skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback. In addition to the theory, the Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS) and the Job Rating Form (JRF), were created. Various approaches stand on the shoulders of this theory, such as the Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ), the Job-Control/Job-Demand-Control model (JD-JC), and the Job-Demands Resources model (JD-R). A notable offspring is the stream of job design and work design. Since the eighties, there has been a growing consideration for the design of work performed by teams. Eventually the concept of role orientation gained popularity, capturing how individuals (and teams) construct their roles in different ways. This was further developed into the *SMART work design model*, which consists of Stimulation (based on skill and task variety), Mastery (based on role clarity and task identity), Agency (based on autonomy), Relations (based on social support and feedback), and Tolerable demands (tolerable workload and stress risks). A final sub-stream is ‘Innovative Work Behaviour’ (IWB), which deals with employee behaviour aimed at bringing about innovations. The *Workplace Innovation Scale* (WIS), much applied in Australia and Asia, originated from this stream of psychological behaviour.

It is concluded that convergence seems hard from a scientific point of view, but looks desirable from a practical standpoint. After all, nobody is against a high quality of work.

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Source:

Oeij, P.R.A., Dhondt, S. & McMurray, A. (December 2021), *Workplace innovation literature review: a converging or diverging research field? A preparatory study for a research agenda* (TNO: Leiden, the Netherlands). Free download: <https://ap.lc/LZHDo>

Further reading on workplace innovation:

Oeij, P. R. A., Rus, D. and Pot, F. D. (Eds) (2017). *Workplace Innovation: Theory, Research and Practice*, Series 'Aligning Perspectives on Health, Safety and Well-Being'. Springer: Cham, Switzerland.

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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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