

EDITORIAL

Workplace Innovation: The Missing Capability in Europe's Strategic Autonomy and Industry 5.0 Agenda?

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Europe's push for strategic autonomy will rise or fall on how work is organised. Beyond factories, chips and critical raw materials, the decisive question is whether our workplaces can learn faster, innovate continuously, and deliver both productivity and quality jobs. That is the promise of workplace innovation—and why it belongs at the centre of Industry 5.0.

Strategic autonomy has become the shorthand for Europe's determination to reduce excessive dependencies, strengthen resilience, and safeguard its capacity to act in an era of geopolitical pressure and supply-chain shocks. But autonomy is not built only in Brussels communiqués or on the balance sheets of new industrial investments. It is built—day after day—on the shop floor, in engineering teams, in logistics hubs, and in public services, wherever people must solve problems, adapt technologies and sustain performance under pressure.

Workplace innovation is the systematic, participatory improvement of work organisation—aligning technology, skills, roles and employee participation so that organisational performance and job quality improve together. It is not a “nice to have” HR programme, nor a one-off change project. It is a capability: the ability of an organisation to learn, redesign and innovate continuously. This is precisely what the European Commission's Industry 5.0 vision calls for when it places human wellbeing, sustainability and resilience at the centre of industrial development.

The uncomfortable truth is that there is a “long tail” between the evidence-based practices associated with workplace innovation and the workplace practices commonly found in European companies. Moreover, digitalisation is outpacing organisational change so that new technologies and AI are imposed on top of command-and-control forms of work organisation, with the result that neither the technologies themselves nor the talents of the workforce are used to their full potential. Worker autonomy is squeezed, trust breaks down, and the capacity for innovation and resilience is eroded. In short: technological innovation in companies must go hand-in-hand with workplace innovation through participation, experimentation and shared learning.

This is why workplace innovation should be read as industrial policy. The Commission's Quality Jobs Roadmap explicitly links productivity and competitiveness to job quality and labour market participation, and it underlines the central role of social partners. Better work design—greater task variety, real autonomy, supportive technology, and continuous skills development—does not only make jobs healthier and more attractive. It improves quality, reduces downtime, accelerates problem-solving, and strengthens the diffusion of innovation across value chains, especially in SMEs that form the backbone of Europe's industrial strength.

Likewise, sustainability and resilience in organisations must be seen in socio-technical terms. They require the full deployment and development of workforce talent, enabling early responses to external

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signals, unleashing ideas for innovation and waste reduction, rapidly adapting routines without waiting for central instructions, and intuitively coordinating across functions. This depends on trust, transparency and employee voice; on teams that can re-plan work when supply is interrupted; on operators who can safely override a system when it fails; and on a culture where reporting problems is rewarded rather than punished. In other words, sustainability and resilience are designed into work organisation.

Strategic autonomy also demands democratic legitimacy. Europe cannot credibly pursue a “just transition” while treating workers as the passive recipients of change. The spread of AI and algorithmic management makes this even more urgent: choices about human–machine task division, data use and performance monitoring directly shape job quality, trust and innovation capacity. Social dialogue and direct participation are therefore not bureaucratic obstacles; they are strategic assets that improve decision quality, reduce implementation risk, and help organisations deploy technology in ways that empower rather than control.

If Europe is serious about open strategic autonomy and Industry 5.0, three practical shifts follow:

- Treat workplace innovation as a core capability in industrial strategy—fund not only R&D, but also participatory redesign, learning networks and support for SMEs to build internal change capacity.
- Make quality jobs a competitiveness lever. Link public support (including procurement and transition funding) to evidence of good work design, skills development and meaningful worker participation.
- Build “human-centric digitalisation” by default. Ensure that AI, data and automation programmes include joint impact assessment on job quality, clear governance, and employee influence over deployment choices.
- Strengthen social dialogue at workplace and value-chain level, especially in sectors facing rapid green and digital restructuring.
- Invest in dissemination, not just invention. Scale what works through peer learning, demonstrators and cross-border communities of practice so that innovation becomes routine rather than episodic.

Europe’s strategic autonomy will not be secured by technology alone. It will be secured when workplaces, public and private, large and small, have the confidence, competence and collective voice to shape technology, reorganise work and innovate continuously. That is what workplace innovation delivers: a human-centred engine for productivity, resilience and sustainability. The task now is to move it from the margins of “good practice” into the mainstream of Europe’s strategic agenda—and EUWIN’s community is well placed to help lead that shift.

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