

Review

Review Article: Workplace Innovation

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A Research Agenda for Workplace Innovation: The Challenge of Disruptive Traditions
Eds. Peter R.A Oeij, Steven Dhondt and Adela J. McMurray
Edward Elgar, Cheltenham 2023

The Practical Side of Digital Transformation: A Tool Book for Practitioners
Eds. Peter R.A. Oeij, Vassil Kirov and Egoitz Pomares
Prof Marin Drinov Publishing House, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia 2023

After many years of collaborative research and networking, initially primarily in Europe, we can identify a new paradigm of “Workplace Innovation” (Totterdill 2015). This comes at a time of turbulence and instability, with disruptive impacts of digitalisation. In contrast to traditional top-down Taylorist management, we see an emerging well documented model of development which is based on dialogue (Gustavsen 1992). In this model, technology is not primarily used to replace human beings, but rather to complement the exercise of individual and collective human skill (Gill 1986; Ennals 1986, 1987; Göranson 1988; Brödner 1990). As the two books under review demonstrate, there is now a powerful international movement, with a rapidly growing literature, and a focus on the workplace (Ennals 1999, 2000, 2001). Support from the European Commission, and the freestanding infrastructure of the European Workplace Innovation Network, with active participation by members, has now provided a sustainable environment for continued development. Successive projects, such as Paradigms 4.0, Beyond 4.0 and Bridges 5.0 mean that there has been iterative growth in trust over 25 years, and mature confidence in collaborative writing.

Contributors to the Edward Elgar volume, edited by Peter Oeij, Steven Dhondt and Adela McMurray, make frequent mention of a new research agenda, but in truth, as we see from the references below, “human centredness” derives from a longer alternative tradition, particularly in Europe. The context of the European Union, with the series of Framework Programmes, has enabled new partnerships and networks to form and achieve sustainability, crossing conventional subject and national boundaries. This will provide key ingredients for “Industry 5.0”.

The innovative research agenda owes much to the evolution of the European Workplace Innovation Network over the last decade, linking institutions across the European Union, and

applying sociotechnical systems thinking. This has provided a model of Workplace Innovation which has been applied in other countries, such as Australia, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. We should not underestimate the stabilising contribution of Steven Dhondt of TNO in the Netherlands and Belgium, with a focus on human centred organisations as the core of Industry 5.0, and the vast knowledge base of company cases maintained by Peter Totterdill of Workplace Innovation Europe, with their “Fresh Thinking Labs”. The editors, with co-authored opening and closing chapters, express the hope that a new research agenda for Workplace Innovation research will emerge, with a common narrative and active participation.

The companion e-book on the “Practical Side of Digital Transformation”, edited by Peter Oeij, Vassil Kirov and Egoitz Pomares, seeks to take a practical approach to digital transformation, with a “Tool Book for Practitioners”. Both volumes involve large numbers of international contributors, with chapters often deliverables from EU funded projects. The same collaborative approach applied to “Coping with the Future”, edited by Hans Christian Garmann Johnsen, Halvor Holtskog and Richard Ennals.

Peter Oeij, with Diana Rus and Frank Pot, edited the 2017 volume which set out the research foundations for Workplace Innovation. This was followed by the Palgrave Handbook in 2021, edited by Adela McMurray, Nuttawuth Muenjohn and Chamindika Werrakoon, broadening the scope to cover developed and developing countries.

My hypothesis is that the exercise of collaborative writing and publishing, within the supportive framework of a well-managed set of projects, itself enables contributors to explain themselves to themselves and others. The European Journal of Workplace Innovation provides further opportunities. Each year we plan to publish a general issue and a special issue, highlighting particular themes. We look forward to a possible special issue of EJWI in 2025, edited again by Peter Oeij, based on the current Bridges 5.0 project.

The outcome of this productive process is a new international literature with many and diverse roots, which is accessible to practitioners, and has the potential to transform the businesses of management and management education. We reflect on our own workplace experience and learn from the different experiences of others (Gustavsen, Nyhan and Ennals 2007; Johnsen and Ennals 2012). Europe can indeed be seen as a “Development Coalition” (Ennals and Gustavsen 1999). In the current European Year of Skills, this literature, with foundations in workplace practice and resilient organisations, has a crucial role to play.

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