

Editorial

Workplace Innovation in the Conditions of Real Work

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Workplace innovation is usually discussed at the meeting point between organisational improvement and the quality of working life. It concerns dialogue, participation, productivity, adaptability and performance, but it also draws attention to the knowledge and experience of people at work.

The contributions to this issue of the *European Journal of Workplace Innovation* approach this meeting point from different settings: a textile SME, a warehouse, Finnish and Swedish public organisations, and the wider debate on Industry 4.0 and Industry 5.0. Their empirical and conceptual concerns differ, but they can be read together around a shared question: how does innovation take shape when it enters the conditions of real work?

The issue therefore does not treat innovation as a fixed object. A tool may be introduced, a reform may be launched, a process may be redesigned, or a technology may be adopted. Yet the meaning of innovation is shaped by what happens as these initiatives encounter everyday work: how they are organised, interpreted, adapted, supported, or made difficult by existing routines, structures and demands.

In *Two Ways to Rome – a comparative study of digital vs. analogue open workplace innovation processes*, Aline Lohse, Stefanie Rockstroh, Leonardo Puricelli, Sophia Worbes, and Angelika C. Bullinger-Hoffmann examine whether digital participation can support workplace innovation in ways comparable to analogue participation. Their study, set in a textile SME, points to a careful but relevant observation: the format alone does not appear to determine the quality of the participatory process. Digital and analogue formats each depend on how participation is organised, how employee knowledge is gathered, and whether contributions are translated into design decisions. The article therefore contributes to current discussions on participation in SMEs without reducing the question to a simple choice between digital and face-to-face methods.

A related concern appears in *Reframing Success in Embodied Work: Competing Perspectives on Occupational Exoskeleton Adoption*, by Veronika Bak, Dr. Jason Pridmore, Dr. Andy Sanchez and Chantal Ho. Here, the workplace technology is not a dashboard or a digital platform, but an occupational exoskeleton worn on the body. The article brings the bodily and practical conditions of use into the discussion of technology adoption. Through the Normalisation-Situated Practice Matrix, the authors examine how formal organisational embedding and workers' situated engagement may align or diverge. Exoskeletons are not adopted only through plans, procedures or metrics; they are worn, adjusted, discussed, tolerated, refused

or reworked in practice. The article offers a way of considering technology integration without reducing it to acceptance or resistance.

The following two articles turn to public-sector change, where workplace innovation is shaped by reform pressures, professional cultures, administrative systems and the everyday demands of service provision. In *Leader Change Engagement as a Boost for Workplace Development*, Satu Uusiautti and Krista Rautio focus on leaders in a Finnish Wellbeing Services County. Their article directs attention to leaders' own experience of change. Leaders are often expected to support, translate and sustain organisational reforms, but their engagement depends on the conditions in which they work. Role clarity, autonomy, communication, participation, support and time emerge as important resources. The article adds a useful perspective to workplace development by considering leaders not only as agents of change, but also as people working within change.

Anna Fogelberg Eriksson and Agneta Halvarsson Lundkvist continue the public-sector focus in *Conditions for workplace innovation in a public organisation - a domino effect of emerging barriers*. Their longitudinal study of a Swedish municipality follows an innovation process from development and testing towards implementation. In the early phases, political support, change leaders, collaborative arenas and interprofessional teamwork created opportunities for learning. As the process moved towards wider implementation, other conditions became more visible: organisational silos, budget structures, administrative systems, professional logics, staffing problems, time pressure and weakened mandates. The article is attentive to how barriers emerge and interact over time, and to how implementation may require renewed learning rather than the simple transfer of an already completed idea.

The Forum contribution by Hartmut Hirsch-Kreinsen, *The Challenge of Socio-Technical Work Design: An Essay on the Open Issues of Industry 4.0 and Industry 5.0*, places these questions within a wider debate on socio-technical work design. Hirsch-Kreinsen revisits the relationship between Industry 4.0, Industry 5.0 and human-centred work. His essay reminds us that work design is not only a matter of tasks, tools and interfaces. It is also shaped by sectors, labour markets, institutional arrangements, economic pressures and political priorities. The contribution gives the issue a broader frame, while also introducing caution about the limits of design concepts when they are detached from wider structural conditions. Seen alongside one another, the contributions do not produce a single model of workplace innovation. Rather, they open a set of related questions. How is participation organised so that it becomes meaningful? How do technologies meet the bodily, practical and social realities of work? What enables leaders to remain engaged during major organisational reforms? What happens when implementation encounters silos, budgets, administrative systems and professional boundaries? And how are ideas of human-centred work shaped by wider industrial and institutional conditions?

These questions are particularly relevant in a European context in which organisations are being asked to become more digital, more sustainable, more resilient and more efficient.

Public organisations face growing needs and limited resources. Industrial firms are navigating technological and economic transformation. Workers and leaders are expected to adapt while continuing to deliver quality, care, safety and productivity.

The value of this issue lies in keeping these questions grounded. It brings workplace innovation close to the settings in which it is attempted, negotiated and revised. Across the articles, innovation appears not as a finished outcome, but as a process situated in work itself: in participation, use, leadership, collaboration, implementation and design.

Workplace innovation, in this sense, remains a practical and open field of inquiry. Its conditions vary, its paths are uneven, and its meanings depend on the people, organisations and institutions through which it unfolds.