

# Sustainable Work in Europe: Concepts, Conditions, Challenges

## Book review

**Edited by Kenneth Abrahamsson and Richard Ennals (2022)**

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Many relevant books, reports and publications about sustainable work and quality of work have been written. However, the book *Sustainable Work in Europe: Concepts, Conditions, Challenges*, edited by Kenneth Abrahamsson and Richard Ennals may be more needed than ever. As Allan Larsson mentions in his preface: “never in modern times has working Europe been faced with such a fundamental and far-reaching transition pressure. We are at the beginning of two powerful transition processes, innovation-driven digital transformation, and policy-driven climate transition. On top of these processes, we are now facing a pandemic-driven restructuring of important sectors of our economies and the way we are working.”

Many or all European countries are struggling with this new uncertainty, and with the associated social and labour market challenges. Temporary jobs and precarious working conditions are increasing in many sectors, while high-performance jobs are increasing in the advanced manufacturing sector. Rigorous research, new models and theory are needed to deal with these challenges of the future of work. Strategies to meet the new challenges need to be developed by countries, social partners, and companies. We need to learn from the Nordic frontrunner countries and researchers. More specifically, knowledge is needed on how to accomplish secure and adaptable employment, equality and health and safety at work, proper work life balance, a good social dialogue and effective participation of workers. New workplace innovations for job quality, productivity and growth are increasingly necessary on the road to a sustainable future of work.

The book addresses these topics and has carefully outlined sustainable work as a process to cope with present and future issues on digitalisation, climate change and the Covid pandemic at the workplace. A sustainable workplace reflects the reconciliation between health, the development of work environment for the employees, and a productive and value-creating mission for organisations. In this regard, the book offers novel intellectual insights, frameworks, and approaches stimulating thinking, further research, and planning for the future of work in Europe. The book looks forward rather than back. It bridges gaps between social science and medicine, adding emphasis on age and gender. The book links workplace practice, theory and policy, and is intended to provide the basis for ongoing debate and dialogue.

*Sustainable Work in Europe* brings together a strong core of Swedish inspired working life research, with additional contributions from across Europe. Chapters have been authored by leading members of the European Workplace Innovation Network (EUWIN), as well as from Eurofound, EU-OSHA and the Perosh network. As a result, the book offers a broad European perspective on Sustainable Work. The book targets fellow researchers and students, but it is also very inspiring and informative for labour professionals, employers, employee representatives, unions, and policy makers. It builds on a special double issue 6.1- 2, March 2021, of the *European Journal of Workplace Innovation*. Most chapters have been revised for this book, and some completely new chapters have been added. The book is divided in three parts consisting of 17 chapters, excluding the preface, foreword and postscript.

The first part *Sustainable work, job quality and equality* focuses on the sustainable work concept, its policy background and relation to job quality, inequality, gender, older workers, and senior employment. Successful sustainable work necessitates social protection, and gender-based welfare systems, such as pension rights. An eyeopening read is Frank Pot's chapter *Monotonous and repetitive work: Some people are more unequal than others*. Over the years more than 20 % of the working population in Europe carry out tasks of less than one minute. However, in the last decade there has been very little in- depth research into this kind of work. It is time to place repetitive work prominently on the agendas again. We can learn from programmes that were executed in Denmark and Belgium in the past. We can better enforce existing legislation. Criteria for "good work" are available, as well as appropriate design theories. Let us not forget this special category of workers with monotonous and repetitive work.

The second section *Sustainable workplace innovations, digitalisation, and the green revolution* highlights the importance of sustainable workplace innovations. It takes a deeper view at change mechanisms and drivers caused by digitalisation, climate change and the Covid 19 pandemic. The message of Lena Abrahamsson and Jan Johansson in their chapter *Digitalisation and Sustainable work: obstacles and pathways* may seem logical but really needs attention. It is a topic that resonates to all of us. We are all concerned about how our work will be in the future: will we be able to handle the new technology, or will technology control us? The aim of their chapter is to identify obstacles, and find pathways for sustainable work, in a digital future. To enable positive development, the technical and organisational development needs to include knowledge and needs of the society, the human and the worker.

The third and final section *From policy to practice: Channels of implementation* focuses on implementation and the channels and methods to connect research, policies, and good practices in order to support employers and employees, unions and employee representatives to move to better workplaces, including better job quality. This is done by highlighting the importance of workplace innovations, social partners and the social dialogue, OSH research collaborations and dissemination as well as the importance of higher education to implement the SDGs. For example, in their chapter *Workplace innovation: Are we serious?* Peter Totterdill

and Rosemary Exton share their experiences and a framework to address the, to date, still limited adoption of Workplace Innovation practices in European organisations, and thereby better helping realising their key public policy goals. Their approach and insights are built on their extensive research, consultancy, workforce development, policy advocacy experience and EUWIN cooperation.

In conclusion, the book is highly informative and inspiring from many viewpoints of both theory, research, practice and policy. The authors and editors should be applauded. It puts forward highly interesting, relevant and inspiring research, theory, and pathways to increase sustainable work and job quality in various European contexts. Now that the concepts and importance of sustainable work and job (e)quality, handles for the current big societal challenges, as well as channels of implementation (e.g., Workplace Innovation) have been well described for the route to sustainable work in Europe, one ongoing challenge remains. Firms, social partners and nations should actually use this knowledge to ensure good work in the future, for everyone. As Kenneth Abrahamsson puts it: *"We must invest in protecting and creating jobs, and in driving our competitive sustainability, by building a fairer, greener and more digital Europe."* So hopefully, in the coming years, we can also applaud our policy makers and leaders.