

Discussion Forum

Learning from Differences: Workplace Innovation, Digitalisation and Working Lives in South Korea

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Workplace Innovation Europe

Workplace innovation has gone global.

At its heart, the workplace innovation concept which we developed with our European colleagues from the beginning of this century represents a practical yet evidence-based way of achieving win-win outcomes for companies and their employees. And now it's spread far beyond Europe.

I was honoured to take part in the Korea Labor Institute's conference on "The Future of Workplace Innovation" in May, alongside fellow speakers from Germany, the Netherlands and the US as well as Korean researchers, policymakers and business representatives. It was my fourth visit to this fascinating country.

Earlier in the year I had hosted Dr Seri No and Professor Yongjin Nho on a visit to Scotland where their itinerary included meetings at Booth Welsh, a company whose workplace innovation journey we've supported since 2017. It was Seri and Yongjin's comparative study of workplace innovation in several countries which formed the starting point for the conference, resulting in some lively discussions.

The debates continued during a workshop later in the week in which I was asked to demonstrate the practical application of workplace innovation to around 50 consultants, drawing on our experiences of working with companies in the UK and elsewhere.

Across the world, there is a growing thirst for know-how in the creation of jobs that use and develop the full range of employee knowledge, skills and ingenuity at work. Whilst there are some differences in approach between Europe and Korea, it is clear that variations in national culture are no impediment to forging better ways of working, and to learning from each other.

Digital opportunities

The week included a field trip to the southern industrial city of Changwon, where we visited a well-known domestic goods company and one of its suppliers.

By coincidence, I had delivered a webinar earlier in the month which demonstrated that technologies are at their most effective when designed and implemented in ways which enhance workforce skills and empowerment – for example, by removing repetitive or arduous tasks and engaging operators more actively in planning, problem solving and improvement. Our visit to Changwon demonstrated what is at stake.

Both companies employed robots on the assembly line, reducing ergonomic risks for employees whilst enhancing productivity, cost reduction, energy saving and customer service. Managers claimed that the robotisation of heavy lifting tasks demonstrated their company's 'utmost respect' for employees.

But the other half of the equation was missing. The 'left over' jobs on the line were characterised by low skill requirements, very short cycle times and extreme monotony, with the pace of work driven by the technology. In one factory, we were told that Korean men were unwilling to take such jobs and so the majority of workers were migrants. Continuous improvement or quality circles were very much of the culture in both companies, but participation was limited to managers and engineers.

We see such one-dimensional approaches to technological innovation as a wasted opportunity for improving the productivity of workers, harnessing their full human potential and improving the quality of their working lives. Workplace innovation is grounded in an integrated, systemic view in which technologies lead to the creation of rounded jobs providing employees with greater control, and enhanced opportunities for learning and development.

Learning from Differences

I've been fortunate throughout my working life to be able to learn from diverse strands of experience, especially from across Europe and sometimes beyond. On occasions this has challenged my understanding of 'what good looks like'; at other times it has added fresh insights into how to create highly effective organisations that are also great places to work. Above all, it has provided rich strands of experience to share with the companies and change leaders we work with, helping them to drive innovation in their own workplaces. That's why we have organised regular 'learning journeys', most recently to Denmark when we took Scottish food and drink companies to discover fresh insights into effective leadership.

To any leader embarking on change within their organisation, we say "invest in learning from others – and especially from those who are different".

With thanks to Peter Oeij (TNO, Netherlands) for his reflections on the visit.