

Book review:

Workplace Innovation: Theory, Research and Practice

Peter R.A. Oeij, Diana Rus and Frank D. Pot (Editors)
In the series *Aligning Perspectives on Health, Safety and Well-Being*
Springer, Switzerland 2017
ISBN 978-3-319-56332-9 413 pp

Reviewed by Richard Ennals

For over two decades there have been efforts within the European Union to build a world-leading approach to business and economic activity which had a strong social dimension. As the EU has grown in membership and economic strength, it has been important to develop a collaborative culture, in which differences are respected, and seen as a resource for learning. Rather than favouring business gurus, on the model of the USA or Japan, there have been a series of Framework Programmes, based on agreed work programmes, which have engaged participation from member countries. This has been the “European Project”, which the UK government will now leave behind, with the UK’s departure from the European Union.

This valuable anthology “Workplace Innovation: Theory, Research and Practice”, brings together authoritative chapters from veteran leading researchers in the influential field of Workplace Innovation. Much of the work since 2012 has been associated with the *European Workplace Innovation Network (EUWIN)*, led from the Netherlands and the UK, which had initial support from the European Commission, and has organised activities in some 30 European countries, networking and sharing experience, increasing the community of active practitioners. It usefully complements the foundations provided by the early volumes of the *European Journal of Workplace Innovation (EJWI)*. It provides a starting point for the design of future programmes.

The book provides insights into strong traditions of research and practice in Health, Safety and Well-Being, and their links with Workplace Innovation. It could be seen as an introduction to a distinct European “Variety of Capitalism”, which can be distinguished from Liberal Capitalism, as exemplified by the USA and the UK. There are strong foundations from socio-technical systems thinking, and echoes from Human Centred Systems. Arguably this European Variety of Capitalism embodies many core principles and practices of Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability, meaning that separate programmes to advance CSR may be unnecessary, or at least significantly different from the “optional extra” approach which is found in Liberal Capitalism, and in other Varieties of Capitalism around the world.

The focus is on people in the workplace, and initiatives to address work organisation and work environment. It emphasises collaboration, partnership and networking, rather than top-down Taylorist management. The starting point is work, rather than business or entrepreneurship. Instead of a remorseless focus on profit and management strategy, Workplace Innovation deals with participation, engagement, learning, communication and responsibility.

As Liberal Capitalism has experienced crisis and disarray since the financial crash of 2008, and the subsequent recession, there has been a need to present practical and credible alternative perspectives. There have been calls for a movement, and programmes to share good practice. Initiatives from several Directorates-General of the European Commission have converged on EUWIN, which accepted the challenge of sustaining momentum between policy programmes. Numerous conferences and networking events have shared good practice cases, providing support and advice. However, funding for EUWIN from the European Commission ended in 2016.

As Totterdill points out, there is no evidence that the provision of “evidence”, in itself, necessarily improves the quality of decision-making. The evidence needs to be encountered by readers who are themselves engaged in facilitating organisational change, and seeking to learn from the different practical experience of others. The Workplace Innovation movement relies on effective facilitation. Rather than simply relying on commercial consultants, there are roles for academic researchers, and in particular action researchers, converting abstract ideas into appropriate practice.

There is a debate to be held on whether there is a single unifying theoretical core behind Workplace Innovation, as is set out in Peter Totterdill’s motivational account of “The Fifth Element”, or whether it should be seen as a cluster of effective practices which have diverse origins. There is a continuing Dutch tradition of grand theory. There have been many competing models of innovation, often with a focus on products or processes, or on mechanistic technology-based approaches. Can one account of Workplace Innovation meet the requirements of all readers? Is it rather a matter of addressing diverse readers in the contexts where they find themselves? This may be accomplished through a constellation of practice-oriented case studies, such as those which have been collected by EUWIN.

For newcomers to this increasingly popular field, the book provides overviews of a European perspective, as well as descriptions of a number of distinct national programmes. The book does not make *EJWI* unnecessary. Rather it provides a complementary robust basis of analysis and references, which should now stimulate a rich flow of new accounts of case study experience.

The book is a product of the young culture of Workplace Innovation, but with many pointers towards longer traditions, such as socio-technical systems, health and well-being. It is an anthology, rather than an edited text with a single line of argument. It has been written by pioneers, with a great degree of overlap and repetition. That is not necessarily a problem, unless it is simply read from cover to cover, in sequence. It provides a reference handbook for aficionados, rather than being likely to make new converts. There are perhaps surprisingly few extended workplace case studies. Many of the case studies which are included are written from outside, rather than conveying the blood, sweat and tears of the Workplace Innovation process.

The book has undoubted relevance beyond the European Union, for example for regional groupings in Southern Africa, West Africa, Latin America and South Asia, where countries seek to work together for collaborative advantage. On that basis, it could be complemented by a set of evangelical and campaigning texts, highlighting links with local cases. Workplace Innovation requires energy.

Any serious university or business school should acquire copies of the book for their libraries, and as a tool for opening up new discussions about the future of work and organisations. Companies and individual practitioners will find valuable road maps, accounts of successful practice from which they could learn.

In summary, the book comes from an active international research community which has been looking back, huddling together for mutual support in times of adversity, and building a vision

for a better future. They are seeking new members, with a common commitment to Workplace Innovation. Like motherhood and apple pie, Workplace Innovation is hard to oppose, but well worth encouraging.