

Editorial

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“Optimism is more fun than pessimism.”

We live in extraordinarily turbulent times. In order to cope with the future, we will have to cope with the past and the present. As I write this Editorial, the headlines in the UK today are that the national economy shrank by 20.4% in April 2020. OECD predicts a downturn of 11.5% in UK production in the coming year. This does not take account of the impact of Brexit, on which vital decisions are to be made this month. We would like to think that “things could only get better”. However, with world-leading figures for deaths from Covid-19, and the likelihood of mass unemployment following the end of current support measures such as furloughs for 8.9 million workers, we must expect further problems before we see a return to sustainable growth in the UK.

The UK is no longer a member of the European Union. I want to argue that, despite this, much can be learned from the different experiences of EU member countries, starting with the papers in this General Issue of the European Journal of Workplace Innovation.

EJWI works closely with the European Workplace Innovation Network (EUWIN), where discussions have begun concerning the world post Covid-19. Workplace Innovation is seen as having an important role to play.

Our first paper, by Christopher Mathieu, Sally Wright, Susanne Boethius and Anne Green, addresses Workplace Innovation in care homes in Sweden and the UK. The paper, with lead authors from Lund and Warwick Universities, was written before Covid-19, but it offers remarkable insights into the institutional contexts where many thousands of vulnerable people have died in recent months. Efforts by professionals were conducted “on a shoestring”, but it is clear that participation and engagement, rather than simply funding, can make a vital difference.

The second paper, by Anne Inga Hilsen and Tonny Kværne, reminds us of traditional Norwegian approaches to Industrial Action Research, taking the reader through the stages of an effective project. There are shared values and approaches, based on experience in Norway and beyond. The Norwegian Model can be exported.

From Finland, we have a paper by Arja Tuulikki Haapakorpi, on collaboration between professional groups, which is increasingly important in addressing problems which go beyond one traditional job or sector. The chosen case study is from new media industries, where Finland has played a leading role.

The Scandinavian States have provided a consistent model of successful innovation, from which other countries in Europe have sought to learn. From Lithuania we have a paper by Antanas Buracas of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, comparing the performance of the Baltic and Scandinavian States, using a variety of criteria. Could the Norwegian Model be successfully exported to Lithuania?

We have a paper from Portugal, by António Alberto Nifrário de Pinho Tavares, which won a recent national competition. The paper seeks to evaluate changes in the Portuguese social security system, discussing issues which are encountered in each country. It is all too easy to talk about reducing “red tape”. What does this mean in practical terms? The paper addresses the technology, and takes views from civil servants, accountants and users.

From Hungary we have a newly written paper, by Csaba Makó, Miklós Illéssy and Saeed Nosratabadi, about the emerging “platform economy” in Europe. The paper discusses controversial cases, such as Uber in Budapest, and compares developments in different European countries. Workers do not have physical workplaces or conventional employment contracts. They are precarious in new and uncomfortable ways.

In the Discussion Forum section of this General Issue, we have two short papers which look ahead.

Frank Pot, Peter Totterdill and Steven Dhondt of EUWIN set out draft policy proposals for the European Commission, with a focus on the new European Social Pillar. A new generation of collaborative projects is in preparation. EUWIN, which is now a sustainable international network, have assembled thousands of company cases, to provide a starting point. Already we can identify case studies of companies which are looking ahead.

Finally, we have a report from the Quality Coffee Shop, by some of the “virtual coffee drinkers”, which has been conducting virtual meetings on weekdays since the start of lockdown, sharing practical experience of Quality and Workplace Innovation. From wholly informal beginnings, it is taking shape as a sustainable and non-hierarchical partnership.

What can we conclude overall? It is hard, or even impossible, to make effective direct comparisons between experiences in different countries, where there are often particular circumstances. However, there is much that can be learned from different experiences, when they are described by people, including researchers, who are themselves engaged in processes of change. It requires decision makers, even in my own country, being prepared to listen, and to engage in processes of dialogue.

We are not the first to address these issues. I was a student of History at Cambridge University. On graduation, I worked for John Bellers Ltd, whose work was based on the ideas of the seventeenth century Quaker economist, whose work was cited by both Adam Smith and Karl Marx. Bellers emphasised the dignity of work, and he argued that society needs to use the efforts of all of its members. In 1710 he published a draft European Constitution.