Position Paper

Europe at work in 2030 – in search of a new narrative
The need to intensify and focus research on the new Concept of Work

In recent years, policy discussions of the future of work have been revived. The ongoing political dialogue and national consultations within the EU on the European Pillar of Social Rights clearly illustrates this development. Well-functioning and fair European labour markets, effective and sustainable social protection systems, and the promotion of social dialogue at all levels will be at the heart of the policy.

On the global scene, ILO, OECD, IMF and the World Bank and independent policy think tanks make significant contributions to the debate and policy formations regarding the future of work. ILO emphasizes its longstanding policy commitment to full and decent employment. These goals are shared at the European level with a strong commitment for full employment, social inclusion, and safe and sustainable work. The quality of jobs, the need for social protection, and improvement of living conditions are also major policy missions in the UN Sustainable Development Goals which sets out the path of achieving a sustainable world society by 2030 and thereby the need to intensify our efforts and focus research efforts.

The traditional view of a workplace is rooted in the Industrial society, where a worker is employed at a factory and performs rather routinized tasks during day time. Many current jobs are much more flexible, with the worker being, to a large extent, in control of when, where and how to perform tasks, and regulated under a variety of employment contracts. The traditional relation between employees and employers is challenged or threatened by new forms of employment relations, increasing levels of self-employment or employment through staffing agencies, and interactions between producers and consumers in the context of sharing economy.

During the past two decades, jobs and labour market structures have been subject to fundamental changes. Increasing digitalization, the new wave of automatization and robotics and new ways to organize work has led to a new debate on job destruction, job redesign and job creation. There has also been a recurrent debate on jobless growth. A major change has occurred within jobs, with increasing demands for new skills, on the job training, and transition skills to meet frequent structural or organizational changes.

However, we still experience a significant lack of attention to the dramatic changes that take place nowadays in the world of work within Europe and globally. Effects on work and work patterns in society should be an integral part of all new technologies and developments appearing in the European research programs. Therefore, the undertaking in the next R&D framework programme FP 9 must focus on impacts and missions, exemplified by the following issues:

- The new Work Concept will lead to a growing diversity in forms of employment, and it will deeply influence the quality of jobs and work environment, health and safety at the workplaces, as well as workplace learning and career development
The new narrative of work offers unprecedented opportunities in terms of autonomy for the individual, healthier and longer life and more innovative and open cities. These opportunities should be available to all individuals so as to avoid increasing polarization between good jobs and bad jobs, disruption and insecurity for the lives of many, and broader inequity and inequality.

To sustain economic growth, prosperity and social developments, the employment participation of migrants, older workers and other currently overseen groups should increase. Educational background, prior qualified job experience, social gradients and professional networks are drivers that can steer the hidden agenda of employment selection or employment rejection.

Disruptive developments initiated by the platform economy, and the drivers of transformations are expected to have significant impact on job creation or job displacement, which needs to be followed by an improved social dialog and improved capacities of the enforcement authorities.

The recurrence and persistence of “classic” work-related risks in industries and services should be avoided by an observant design of new jobs.

This Position paper has emanated from the Swedish Platform for Sustainable Work as a resource for health, innovation and growth, which was initiated in 2013 with the purpose of promoting inclusion of issues focusing on sustainable work in Horizon 2020 (www.sustainablework2020.se). This Paper has been prepared in an ongoing cooperation with some individual members of PEROSH - a network of 13 Occupational Safety and Health Institutes (www.perosh.eu) so as to more forcefully advocate attention to the new concept of work and the challenges described above.

We appeal to the Commission to consider a robust standard line or paragraph requesting all research proposals to pay specific attention to the effects on the working conditions and working patterns of humans. Next to a business case calculating the return on investments in new technologies, we need a human case describing effects on human work.

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