

Sectoral Brief

Commerce

Recent developments

Over the last decade, two trends have led to spectacular growth in the size and reach of commerce companies: extensive consolidation and concurrent worldwide expansion of retailers. Increased competition has also exerted downward pressure on prices eroding profit margins, compelling businesses to introduce more powerful technologies across a wide range of operations, including in the management of their human resources and their far-flung supplier, distribution and retail store networks.

The social and labour effects of new retail technologies have consequently been the focus of recent ILO action. A three-day tripartite meeting in Geneva in September 2006 brought together 77 participants, representing governments, employers and trade unions. The meeting acknowledged the potential gains from new technologies, but emphasized the need for workers and employers to use social dialogue to ensure both benefits and costs were fairly shared. A follow-up roundtable in November 2007 called for tripartite dialogue to modify education and training systems to adapt them to changes in labour market related to technological advances.

A two-day Global Dialogue Forum on Vocational Education and Skills Development for Commerce Workers was also held in September 2008, which examined current and future skills needs in the sector as a basis for designing skills development strategies and vocational education programmes for workers to support their employment prospects and employability, and to improve business productivity and competitiveness.

The latest two-day Global Dialogue Forum on adapting work processes and working environments in retail commerce to older workers' needs is scheduled for September 2011. It is intended to examine ways in which work processes and the working environment in this labour – intensive sector could be adapted to enhance its ability to compete effectively in the labour market in the context of an ageing population.

In addition, the ILO has provided support to sectoral constituents at the regional and national levels to address the issue of employment in a change of work environment, including as a result of new retail technologies. A subregional study on commerce sector technological change and skills requirements covering Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay is currently being updated. In addition, funding was provided for a national high-level tripartite workshop on the same issue in Argentina. These activities follow another ILO tripartite seminar in December 2005 which reviewed structural and technological change in Asian retailing and suggested ways in which social dialogue could support such change. The seminar organized in Bangkok, Thailand, brought together delegates from China, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore and Thailand and observers from Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Thailand and the United States. Seminar recommendations which called on governments, employers and workers' organizations to take a positive approach to skills and training, harnessing continuous dialogue for harmonious industrial relations remain solid.