



INNOVATIVE, CREATIVE AND ADAPTABLE – HOW TO KEEP PACE WITH THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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The digital transformation of the economy is changing the way we live, work and do business. Companies are at the forefront of this evolution, providing the technology that facilitates this transformation. But the wider business community can also face challenges in integrating technology in a cost-effective way which improves productivity along with workers' well-being. Unfortunately, however, debates tend to focus on the challenges for workers.

Society, the economy and the world of work have much to gain with this transformation and there is a broad consensus on the opportunities for improvement of occupational safety and health (OSH). We are seeing only the tip of the iceberg in terms of what is and will be possible.

To reap the maximum benefits, this transformation must evolve in a human-centric and inclusive way.

The question is whether our attitudes and approach to the future world of work will allow us to be innovative, creative and adaptable, or whether our albeit legitimate but often unfounded fears will get the better of us. The question is also whether policy responses to the changes will be flexible enough to leave space for tailored solutions by social partners as well as individual companies and workers.

Digital transformation – benefits for all?

The number of workplace accidents in Europe has been consistently decreasing over the last 2 decades. The further development and successful integration at the workplace of automation, robotisation, artificial intelligence etc, has an enormous potential to cut this even further, with workers no longer doing the most dangerous or physically intense tasks. Take for example the

use of robots in the removal of asbestos and the potential this has for lowering workers' exposure.

But the potential of the digital transformation for OSH should not be reduced to physical work tasks – this is only part of the picture.

Where at least as many potential benefits are to be gained is through the successful integration of new digital technologies towards increased worker well-being, engagement and personal fulfilment. With workers doing less dull, repetitive or monotonous tasks, their time can be allocated to more complex and creative tasks. And the focus can be on those where a human aspect is essential, such as critical decision-making, emotional intelligence and value judgement. This is where the more traditional world of OSH - technical, scientific, and risk-based - meets the broader world of work organisation. However, this transformation has to take place in an inclusive way, to avoid creating divisions in the world of work and in society between those with the necessary talents and skills and those left behind. This makes skills forecasting and updating absolutely essential.

The use of digital tools and devices can also have benefits for workers' wellbeing, in terms of giving more autonomy, control and allowing for better work-life balance. Of course, there are two sides to this story. Justifiable questions arise about control, pressure, work intensity, the blurring of the boundaries between work and private life and the impact that this can have on workers' health. However, solutions will not be found by setting strict one-size-fits-all rules or procedures, which rigidly prescribe to companies and workers how they should deal with these challenges. The solutions lie in equipping workers and employers to manage the changes in a way which fits their situation.

Worker well-being – automatic productivity gains?

The potential employer gains with the digital transformation of increased efficiency, productivity and competitiveness are certainly not negligible. Furthermore, there is clear evidence that as long as the costs are not disproportionate, OSH improvements also contribute to the profitability and competitiveness of companies. Therefore, based on the assumption that integration of digital technology can improve workers' occupational safety and health, this can have an added value for companies.

At the same time, new technology, even if available on the market, is unlikely to be adopted immediately by companies, due to the time it can take to recuperate the necessary investment costs. Whether and when new technology is adopted also depends on the general strategy of the company, including its desire and foresight to integrate new technologies, whether it does so straight away throughout company operations or step by step. It also depends on its ability to do so in terms of coping with the disruption of existing processes and depending on the level of acceptance by the workforce.

Whilst there is merit in the belief that improving workers' wellbeing, personal fulfillment and motivation will have a positive impact on their productivity, and conversely that stressed, overburdened and unfulfilled workers are not likely to be as productive, this is certainly not a given. It depends on many other factors, including whether the worker has the right skills, whether they work well in a team, whether they take initiative, whether they are adaptable and flexible and whether they are motivated to contribute to the company's success. Therefore, it is crucial to make sure that the integration of digital technology and use of digital tools helps to increase companies' overall productivity, competitiveness, and employment. This also means that while employers have a responsibility in supporting and informing workers in all aspects related to OSH, workers also need to be adaptable to these changes to remain employable in a rapidly changing world of work.

Robots - the new workforce?

It would be difficult to speak about the digital transformation without touching on the debate about job destruction. Bearing in mind that one of the biggest threats to people's health, particularly mental health and well-being, is sustained unemployment, this is important from an OSH point of view. It is vital that those workers who are replaced by robots or other types of technology are able to find work again, not only for the individuals concerned but also for the economy and society at large.

However, the reality regarding replacement of humans with robots is much more nuanced than we are sometimes led to believe. The extent of the replacement effect depends on the scope for automation, i.e. whether machines can technically replace labour. The range of estimations of the share of jobs susceptible to automation (anything from 4% to 40%), highlights the difficulties and dangers of making predictions in this field, especially if they become the basis for policy. It is in fact very unlikely that entire occupations or jobs will be automated, because this is difficult for some specific tasks. Therefore, we should rather speak about replacement and adaptation of specific tasks rather than of jobs. The replacement effect is also very sector-specific. Automation and robotization at the workplace often conjure up images of a modern factory settings, but what about the opportunities for improving productivity and OSH in the services sector, administration, transport?

In any case, probably the largest potential lies in the partnership between humans and machines. So far, robots and other technologies have been used to work in parallel with people, with the aim of improving efficiency in processes. Now we need to support and accompany the development of human-machine interaction. This, however, raises questions on how to manage the OSH risks related to the physical interactions between humans and machines, but also the psychosocial interactions, including the acceptance of humans to co-work with machines.

What should be our guiding principles to accompany the transition?

The world of work is changing as we speak. We are not able to predict exactly what type of technology will exist in the future, how it will be integrated into the world of work and what impacts – positive or negative – this will have on OSH.

Therefore, a modern policy framework is necessary, which is flexible enough to leave room for tailor-made solutions by social partners, and by individual companies and workers. Putting people at the centre of the digital transformation and enhancing productivity and competitiveness of companies must be at the heart of our actions.

Whilst the speed at which technology develops and the possibilities it gives us as employers and workers are impressive, not everyone is well prepared.

If the digital transformation is to have a positive impact on OSH in an inclusive way, depending on their situation, employers and workers may need support in assessing the implications of the changes for OSH and in devising strategies to adapt to them.

To maximise the potential of use of digital tools, automation, robotisation and other technologies for improving OSH, we need to be open to innovation, including in the way we work, to new ideas, to be creative, and to have a positive approach to change. Above all this requires a climate of trust and respect between workers and employers, which is the necessary foundation for a thriving social partnership.

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