

## The Grand Societal Challenge: sustainable European work to withstand global economic change and crisis

*The Final Conference of the WORK-IN-NET Consortium on March 11-12, 2010 in Berlin put the spotlight on working life research as force to be used to promote sustainable work and work-oriented innovation in Europe. This is of particular relevance in times of crisis in order to prepare for the economic upturn, to increase competitiveness and to avoid social dumping. The conference was organised by the WORK-IN-NET Consortium and coordinated by PT-DLR.*

More and more research indicates that the achievement of a sustainable and socially inclusive knowledge economy depends on what happens in the workplace. It is no longer reasonable to expect that EUROPE 2020 can be achieved solely by influencing input to production such as qualifications and levels of employment. Policy intervention should actively encourage and support enterprises to organise work processes in ways that enable employees at all levels (from shopfloor to management) to use and develop their competence and creative potential to the full. This happens very successfully in a small minority of Member States and these examples should be understood as benchmark for all countries. The EU has a key role to play in widening such forms of intervention.

There is ample evidence to show that such sustainable work systems enhance competitiveness, quality of jobs and the effective functioning of the labour market.

Europe needs growth and job creation, but not just any job. One of the key priorities in the Commission's document on EUROPE 2020 is *empowering*

*people in inclusive societies.* The acquisition of new skills, fostering creativity and innovation, the development of entrepreneurship and a smooth transition between jobs will be crucial in a world which will offer more jobs in exchange for greater adaptability. However such adaptability is not just a personal attribute. Rather it also depends on how a job is designed and on the existence of a socially sustainable work system. This provides the link to the other two priorities, namely *creating value by basing growth on knowledge and creating a competitive, connected and greener economy.*

European policymakers need to include sustainable work systems and work-oriented innovation in the growth strategy if the EUROPE 2020 vision is to be achievable. However this is not sufficient; policymakers together with enterprises have to create the conditions under which more advanced forms of workplace innovation will occur on a large scale. For example the priorities of the Research Framework Programme and the Innovation Framework Programme make it possible to fund relevant cross-national and multidisciplinary research as well as to improve the innovative capacity of industry. The Integrated Guidelines influence the extent to which Member States create a business environment conducive to workplace innovation, while the European Structural Funds can provide specific resources to facilitate transformation at enterprise level.

### **The long tail**

At present there are substantial differences between Member States in pol-

icy and practice when it comes to work organisation. The more advanced forms are found in the Nordic countries and the Netherlands. Lean production is common in the Baltic countries, Poland, the UK and Ireland. Taylorist modes of production are mainly seen in the Eastern European countries. Due to the current crisis, a backlash in the organisation of work has occurred and many employers have gone back to older modes of production.

### **A precondition: improving skills**

According to the Lisbon Strategy, future Europe was intended to build on a knowledge-based economy where innovation and entrepreneurship are the major driving forces. Competitiveness should not be based on lowering standards of health and safety at work or on using cheap labour. However, we also know that the benefits of investment in skills and training are not fully realised unless employees have the ability to use all their competencies in everyday work. Better workplaces and better economic performance do have a positive correlation. This is why research and dissemination relating to sustainable work systems should be anchored in the EUROPE 2020 vision.

### **More research and . . .**

New forms of work organisation are seen to improve productivity, quality of work and, in general, to be superior to old Taylorist models. Although research-based knowledge about what constitutes sustainable work systems exists, more theoretical and conceptual work is needed to refine the concepts.

There is a compelling case for new research on the connections between work organisation, productivity and performance, including comparative research between countries. Likewise

new research is required to secure a better understanding of the dynamic relationship between employee voice and social dialogue, human factors in technology design, and the driving forces of innovation. Other crucial fields in promoting sustainable work systems include gender perspectives on working life as well as the employment needs of an ageing and non-standardized workforce, people with disabilities and migrant workers.

Greater resourcing for demand-driven research, focusing on the creation of actionable knowledge for practitioners, is also needed.

### **. . . improved knowledge transfer**

Europe has untapped potential for managing and distributing the research-based knowledge that it has already accumulated, and greater attention needs to be paid to this dimension. Existing European research networks on working life could be mobilised for these purposes.

New mechanisms for disseminating effective practice to workplaces are also required including more effective models of cooperation between practitioners and researchers in order to disseminate and evaluate new forms of work organisation. There are examples of excellent practice in dissemination in several EU Member States, but these may be little known beyond their own territorial areas.

Relevant indicators of successful, healthy and resilient workplaces are also lacking in the policy sphere, while sophisticated evaluation tools are scarce. Existing labour market indicators provide little information about what people are doing at work or about the quality of their work. Further intervention is needed to monitor and

benchmark working practices and workplace innovation across Member States, and to create guidelines for sustainable work systems. Measures of productivity applicable to knowledge-based production and high-skilled professional work should also be developed. An important challenge for future European work places is to create and support transnational learning for all stakeholders.

### **In conclusion**

EUROPE 2020 provides a unique opportunity to demonstrate the vision and leadership required to build a more successful economy and better jobs in response to an increasingly volatile global economy and a changing population. However the realisation of this vision is predicated on significant changes taking place within the majority of European workplaces: changes that will empower employees and employers at all levels by enabling them to use and develop their skills and innovative capacity to the full. The need for such changes is no longer a matter of contention: there is ample evidence that such workplaces perform better against all of the economic and social measures that underpin EUROPE 2020.

Yet while the workplace remains largely invisible within EU policy dialogue, the transformation of workplaces will continue to be both slow and uneven.

### **We therefore call on the EU:**

- to introduce the empowering and productive workplace as a key element within the EUROPE 2020 vision;
- to examine the full range of policy instruments and mechanisms at its disposal (including the Integrated Guidelines, European Social Fund, and the Research and Innovation Framework Programmes) that can be used to create the conditions for widespread workplace innovation;
- to engage in dialogue with national policymakers and programme managers, researchers and social partners about how these conditions can be realised in practice;
- to instigate a series of pilot actions and support measures designed to build capacity at national and transnational levels to resource workplace innovation.