

**WORKPLACE INNOVATION**  
***EUROPE 2020'S MISSING DIMENSION?***

**Report of a Workshop hosted by  
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities**

**23<sup>rd</sup> June 2010**

## INTRODUCTION

On 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2010 a Workshop was hosted by Robert Strauss and Sue Bird of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities to explore the potential contribution that workplace innovation and new forms of work organisation can make to the realisation of the Europe 2020 strategy. The Workshop was proposed by the Work-In-Net consortium ([www.workinnet.org](http://www.workinnet.org)) after its *Berlin Declaration* (Appendix 1) was published in the context of the Europe 2020 consultation.

The proposition underpinning the workshop was that appropriate interventions led by public policy and social partners could significantly enhance the adoption of new forms of work organisation; this in turn would lead to measurable increases in productivity, innovation, job quality, employability, the distribution of appropriate skills, workplace health and other measures relevant to Europe 2020. Evidence from national programmes was presented to support this proposition. However it was also argued that support for workplace innovation is unevenly distributed across Europe, and that the EU should consider ways in which it can address the gap.

Presentations from the six speakers addressed the following:

- New forms of work organisation and why they are important
- Obstacles to dissemination
- Lessons from national programmes
- A win-win case study
- The role of EU policy

The speakers were:

- Professor Peter Totterdill (UK Work Organisation Network/Kingston University, UK)
- Dr Volker Telljohan (IRES Emilia Romagna, Italy)
- Dr Tuomo Alasoini (TEKES, Finland)
- Paul Berckmans (SERV, Belgium)
- Palle Banke (Danish Technological Institute, Denmark)
- Dr Claudio Zettel (Ministry of Education and Research, Germany).

Participants, including representatives from DG Empl, Enterprise, Research and Sanco, took part in a lively discussion following the presentations.

This paper summarises key issues arising from the Workshop and concludes with specific recommendations for action by the European Commission.

## WHAT ARE WORK ORGANISATION AND WORKPLACE INNOVATION?

**Work organisation** describes those workplace practices that determine whether employees are engaged in using their skills, knowledge and innovative potential to the full, and the extent to which employers maximise their return on investment both in training and technology. New and participative forms of work organisation can be a driver for productivity, innovation, better jobs, skills enhancement, active ageing and health at work. Typical manifestations of participative approaches include well-balanced jobs, self-managed teamworking, high levels of employee involvement in improvement and innovation, and the encouragement of entrepreneurial behaviour at all levels of the organisation.

The relationship between improvements in labour productivity and quality of working life is not a zero-sum game. Problems in both of them can be examined as shortcomings in current workplace practice. New practices that help solve these shortcomings can be called **workplace innovations**. Workplace innovations are collaboratively adopted changes in a company's work, organisational and human resource management practices that lead to improved operative/human performance and that also support other types of innovation.

## **WHY DOES IT MATTER?**

The design of work processes and the extent to which organisational practices facilitate or inhibit employee participation actively influences the ability of organisations to compete, innovate in products and services or address environmental issues. These factors exercise a major influence on the extent to which employees can utilise their skills and develop them further, and therefore on the return which employers and public agencies realise from their investment in vocational training. Work organisation is also a determinant of employees' quality of working life, shaping the extent to which they gain satisfaction and personal growth from their working lives; it therefore influences their level of engagement, their ambition, their retention by the organisation (not least in the case of older workers able to retire or mothers considering whether to return to work after the birth of children), and their mental and physical health. Yet the evidence suggests that only a small proportion of workplaces, public or private, are deploying such "high road" participative working methods systemically across the whole organisation. This inevitably acts as a major brake on the ability to realise Europe 2020 targets.

Policymakers tend not to understand workplaces or the organisation of work, and only a small number of Member States operate programmes to support workplace innovation. Work organisation is regarded as a private matter for employers, at best involving consultation and participation involving employees or trade unions but this is only sporadically reinforced by regulation or active policy. In consequence work organisation has become an underused resource for European public policy.

## **IF IT WORKS, WHY ISN'T EVERYONE DOING IT?**

Successive studies have made clear that the spread of "high road" forms of work organisation is limited in Europe. This can be explained by a number of mutually reinforcing factors<sup>i ii</sup> including:

- low levels of awareness of innovative practice and its benefits amongst managers, social partners and business support organisations;
- the prevalence of partial change rather than systemic organisational approaches;
- poor access to evidence-based methods and resources capable of supporting organisational innovation;
- the failure of vocational education and training to provide knowledge and skills relevant to new forms of work organisation;
- uneven provision across Europe of knowledge-based business services and other publicly provided forms of support.

At public policy and social partner levels there are major territorial inequalities. Almost no country in Southern and Eastern Europe has yet developed a public programme to support organisational innovation. Scant awareness of the importance of work organisation is endemic both amongst both public decision-makers and social actors. From an industrial relations perspective, the main

shortcoming of current organisational innovation is that new ways of working are often introduced without the involvement of the trade unions. Moreover, company-level employee representative bodies are almost never automatically involved when changes are made to the organisation of work. This reflects Directive 2002 / 14 / EC which acknowledges that the existence of legal frameworks “has not always prevented serious decisions affecting employees from being taken and made public without adequate procedures having been implemented beforehand to inform and consult them.” Existing frameworks “tend to adopt an excessively *a posteriori* approach to the process of change, neglect the economic aspects of decisions taken and do not contribute either to genuine anticipation of employment developments within the undertaking or to risk prevention.”

Of crucial importance in the promotion of workforce involvement are the relationships established between participation and bargaining structures, and among the various forms of participation (direct and representative). In many cases forms of direct involvement have been viewed by unions as a threat, and in some circumstances have provoked open conflict. Unilateral decisions to introduce forms of direct participation may undermine trust relations among the industrial relations actors, resulting in all such schemes being ineffective. This highlights the importance of the integrated use of direct and representative forms of participation. If the two forms are not coordinated, direct involvement seems bound to fail in the majority of cases.

## EVIDENCE FROM THE FRONTLINE

There are many different ways in which public policymakers and social partners can intervene to support workplace innovation:

<b>Hard/indirect regulation</b> Legislation which focuses indirectly on workplace innovation through changes in some other policy area (e.g. education system, product market and labour market).		<b>Hard/direct regulation</b> Legislation which focuses directly on workplace innovation (e.g. new work, organisational and managerial practices).
<b>Soft/indirect regulation</b> General policy frameworks and recommendations.	<b>Soft/intermediate regulation</b> Information on “good/best practices”, and training and education of managers and employees.	<b>Soft/direct regulation</b> Advisory and consulting services, benchmarking tools, and grants and subsidies to companies.
<b>Deregulation</b>		

UKWON’s study on *Workplace Innovation Programmes in European Countries*<sup>iii</sup> demonstrated that in a minority of EU countries, targeted public programmes developed and implemented in collaboration with social partners were successfully addressing these constraints. Such programmes typically include:

- accumulating, analysing and distributing knowledge of leading-edge practice and evidence-based approaches to change
- the establishment of closer links between researchers and practitioners
- action research to promote workplace innovation
- the development of new learning resources to support workplace change
- the provision of knowledge-based business support
- the creation of inter-company learning networks.

Across Europe the policy response has been uneven. In France, Germany and some of the Nordic countries, for example, the provision of support for workplace innovation has been a constant though evolving feature of the policy landscape for up to four decades. Elsewhere however such support has been either occasional or non-existent. The Workshop considered evidence from programmes in Finland and Flanders:

### **Finland: an exemplary model of intervention**

In recent years, Finland has carried out working life programmes with the overall aim of promoting sustainable productivity growth. The concept of 'sustainable productivity growth' refers here to productivity growth that is achieved through solutions which simultaneously improve the quality of working life, e.g. employees' opportunities for learning and influence at work and job satisfaction. The main challenges for a future strategy for sustainable productivity growth in Finland include speeding up the annual growth of productivity, bringing about a favourable growth of productivity on a broader front of sectors and companies than today, enabling the development of new engines for productivity growth for the future, and finding new ways to improve the quality of working life in an environment in which the pace of change is rapid.

The TYKES programme has funded nearly 1,200 development projects in virtually all sectors of the economy. The number of workplaces that have participated in the projects is over 3,000 and the number of employees participating in these projects in Finnish private and public workplaces is about 2,000,000. TYKES has been implemented in close cooperation between the government, the labour market organisations and universities and other research and development institutes.

From 2008 on, the promotion of workplace innovation has been increasingly integrated in Finland under the concept of 'broad-based innovation policy'. The new policy is based on a systematic approach, which aims to unleash the potentials of innovative individuals and communities, which has a strong demand and user orientation, and which is global in its orientation.

With a view to improving productivity performance in a sustainable way in a globalising innovation race, Finnish companies should not only boost their capability to provide innovation but also rethink the way innovations will be produced. Characteristic of innovation processes in the new environment is that innovations increasingly emerge from interaction between multiple actors, that they occur in ever shorter cycles, that they are increasingly based on the 'open innovation' model, and that activities to create innovations are increasingly integrated with normal work processes by the personnel. At the same time, the production of innovations should be increasingly integrated with the process of comprehensive organisational learning. An innovative organisation is also by necessity, a participatory organisation. From the Finnish experience, countries that have experience in stimulating this convergence will have a competitive edge over others.

Some broad conclusions based in data generated from the TYKES programme can be found in the following table:

- ✚ **Productivity and Quality of Working Life (QWL):** A mutually supporting relationship between the promotion of productivity and QWL exists at workplace level, i.e. both of them can be supported with similar kinds of development methods.
- ✚ **System-level approach:** The target of development at workplace level is the work system that consists of several interdependent work, organisational and HRM practices, rather than a focus on individual practices.
- ✚ **Local learning processes:** Workplace innovations usually call for a great deal of 'local re-invention', which means that promoting sustainable productivity growth requires local learning processes rather than the transfer of ready-made 'good/best practices' from one workplace context to another.
- ✚ **Labour-management cooperation:** Cooperation between management and personnel in development is important, because in this way it is possible to utilise versatile expertise in the planning and implementation of new solutions and to create shared understanding and acceptance of the grounds for decision-making.
- ✚ **Research-supported development:** Interplay between research and development in projects lays more favourable conditions for both innovative workplace-level solutions and the creation of new generalised knowledge than research or development alone.
- ✚ **Expanded triple helix:** In modern knowledge-based societies, there usually are several clusters of innovation which possess different kinds of knowledge, implying that the most favourable conditions for workplace innovations derive from close interaction and cooperation between them.
- ✚ **Inclusiveness:** For the maintenance of the conditions for the Finnish welfare state, it is important to foster innovative development in all sectors of the economy and in all kinds of workplaces.

## Belgium: persuasive research findings from Flanders

In Flanders, the social partners and the Flemish government agreed in *Pact 2020* that by 2020, 60% of all jobs in the labour market must be characterised by a good quality of working life (known as a *workable job*).

The *Foundation Innovation & Work*, embedded in the Social and Economic Council of Flanders, was asked to set up a monitoring system to measure the workability rate. Monitoring consists of a postal survey sent to 20.000 employees. The survey is organised every three years since 2004, and a high response rates (60,6% in 2004, 53,3% in 2007) guarantees representativeness.

A job is classified as workable when four conditions are unproblematic: work related stress; well-being at work (motivation); sufficient learning opportunities in the job; the work-family balance. In 2004 and 2007, 52.3% and 54.1% respectively of the jobs in the Flemish labour market qualified as workable.

The impact on employability is very clear:

- Employees in a workable job have a much more positive score on absenteeism indicators:
  - Only 7.5% of employees with a workable job have more than 20 days' sickness absence compared with 15.7% of employees with 2 or more pressure points in their job (2004);
  - 1.2% of employees with a workable job have serious health problems compared with 19.2% of employees with 2 or more pressure points (2004);
  - 2.3% of employees with a workable job intend to leave their workplace compared with 22.3% of employees with 2 or more pressure points (2004).

- Asked about plans to remain in the job until the legally defined age of retirement, the impact of quality of working life is even more impressive:
  - 82.8% of employees with a workable job have no problem with working until the legally defined age of retirement (2007).
  - This score falls dramatically to 39.4% for employees with 2 or more pressure points in their job, and to 12.7% and 8.5% respectively for employees with 3 or 4 pressure points.
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We can conclude that a higher employability rate is very closely linked to better quality work.

### **Denmark: a case study of workplace innovation**

A Danish case provides clear insight into how to overcome the barriers towards innovation embedded in traditional thinking around design, development and implementation of new technology. The ‘employee-driven scenario’ method was developed by the Danish Technological Institute to give operators a voice in discussion with managers, engineers and machine suppliers, supporting the transformation of tacit knowledge from the ‘old’ way of working to the new production system. It was financed by the Danish Work Environment Research Foundation.

Aarsleff Pipe Technologies renovates pipe systems with trenchless methods. Part of the production consists of mixing polyester, and this is where the project was developed. An old mixing plant experiencing many health and safety problems was to be exchanged with a new one. A new technical system had already been ordered, but management had only given general information to those employees directly involved. The task for Danish Technological Institute project was to instigate dialogue between the company and its employees in order to integrate their knowledge of existing working methods and health and safety problems into protocols for the operation of the new machines.

The first stage involved ‘scanning interviews’ with a sample of production, production management, planning and maintenance employees. These were designed to detect problems and latent opportunities connected to the implementation, as well as enabling preferences and requirements related to future workspace design to be identified. Scanning interviews focus on normal every-day operation and especially on the use of tacit knowledge in resolving critical incidents relating to breakdowns, maintenance, flexibility/changeover, planning and scheduling, production management, and training/education.

Stage two involved a journey in time during which everyday situations took place including major and minor operational problems. In this employee-driven scenario the participants imagined the new room arrangement and acted out typical situations, thus simulating the interaction between a new machine and auxiliary tools, processes and collaborative routines both in their own group and externally with other departments. To assist the simulation, a dimensionally accurate 1:20 model of the production area was prepared. Small models of



machines, racks and piping were cut in cardboard so that they could be moved around. The model was even furnished with Lego men to illustrate manual functions and the need for co-operation. Moreover the scenario exercise took place in the production room where the new machine would be placed. Planned walls, machine location and doors were marked on the floor of the room with tape. The exercise took place over two half days, with a two week interval to enable participants to investigate further issues that had arisen during the first session.

Over the two sessions it became very clear to participants that the planned version of the new facility did not enable experienced operators to handle extreme situations effectively. This was particularly evident when it was decided that a vacuum tank placed in accordance with the engineer's drawings would have to be moved to another room after a breakdown was simulated. Several other outcomes relating to health and safety and job satisfaction were also implemented in the final design.

*"Initially, the starting point was to optimize the piping. However, now some quite different things have come into focus, and the facility will end up looking quite different than originally planned."*  
(Consulting engineer)

In summary, Employee-driven scenarios can enable operators to become important stakeholders in process architecture by involving the future users in the work performed by architects, engineers, machine suppliers and consultants. At the same time, this paves the way for at genuine win-win working practices with improved job quality and more flexible and secure production methods.

## **CONCLUSIONS: THE IMPLICATIONS FOR EU POLICY**

The Workshop provided a brief glimpse of an overwhelming body of evidence which demonstrates that:

- Workplace innovation linked to the introduction of new forms of work organisation makes a significant impact on indicators that lie at the heart of Europe 2020, including productivity, innovation quality of jobs, active ageing, healthy work and the acquisition of appropriate skills.
- Targeted intervention by public agencies and social partners works as a means of stimulating and resourcing workplace innovation in ways that produce win-win outcomes for enterprises and employees.
- Such intervention remains relatively rare in Europe, and goes some way to explaining the "long tail" between leading-edge practice and common practice throughout European enterprises.

We argue that the European Commission can play a much more effective leadership role. Priorities for EU action identified by the Work-In-Net Consortium include:

**Enhancing the policy profile.** "Work organisation" appears frequently as an issue in EU policy documentation and even in the European Social Fund but there is insufficient evidence of its translation into action. Measurable performance targets relating to work organisation need to be incorporated within the Integrated Guidelines based on systematic data collection (see [www.meadow-project.eu](http://www.meadow-project.eu)). Measures to raise awareness of the significance of work organisation should be targeted at ESF operational structures at national and regional level<sup>iv</sup>.

**Raising beacons.** A targeted transnational initiative should be launched by DG Employment to resource the establishment of new coalitions and to fund demonstrator projects in Member States which currently lack national programmes.

**Engaging social partners.** Social partner organisations at national and local levels can play a key role as knowledgeable participants in stimulating, guiding and resourcing workplace change, but they also need help and support to fulfil this role. More support is needed for social dialogue and capacity building actions targeted at national and local social partners.

**Building capacity.** Many countries lack the intermediate organisations capable of bringing together policymakers, social partners, researchers and practitioners around collaborative action relating to the modernisation of work organisation. Direct support for the creation of new capacity and network building is required to pump prime actions in many Member States.

**Mainstreaming.** Work organisation is a critical factor for the success of skills development and enterprise strategies. Funding to promote workplace innovation should therefore be at the heart of such strategies at EU, national and regional levels.

**Researching “what works”.** Action-oriented research into the conditions for effective and sustainable change in organisations remains a priority, establishing the conditions under which improved organisational performance and enhanced quality of working life can converge.

**Responding to emergent change.** The emergence of new sectors of production, new ways of working and new global challenges in a fast-changing world presents new dilemmas for the design of work organisation, and for the identification of “high road” solutions. Continuing programmes of experimentation are needed to generate the actionable knowledge which will ensure Europe’s continued versatility and ability to innovate.

**Distributing knowledge.** Europe already has a vast store of research-based knowledge and case study experience, but little of this is in a form readily available to practitioners. In part this reflects a lack of translation between languages and in part a lack of translation between academic research and practice. New mechanisms for capturing, distilling and distributing knowledge of work organisation throughout the practitioner community are required.

## CONTACT

Professor Peter Totterdill  
UK Work Organisation Network  
54-56 High Pavement  
Nottingham NG1 1HW, UK

Telephone +44 (0)115 933 8321  
Email [peter.totterdill@ukwon.net](mailto:peter.totterdill@ukwon.net)

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<sup>i</sup> Business Decisions Ltd (2002) *New Forms of Work Organisation: The Obstacles to Wider Diffusion*. DG Employment and Social Affairs, KE-47-02-115-EN-C. Brussels: European Commission.

<sup>ii</sup> Totterdill, P., Dhondt, S. and Milsome, S. (2002) *Partners at Work? A Report to Europe’s Policy Makers and Social Partners*. The Work Institute, Nottingham (available at [www.ukwon.net](http://www.ukwon.net)).

<sup>iii</sup> UKWON (2009) *Workplace Innovation in European Countries*. A Report to the Korean Workplace Innovation Centre. Available from [peter.totterdill@ukwon.net](mailto:peter.totterdill@ukwon.net)

<sup>iv</sup> EWON (2002) *The use of ESF funds in supporting the modernisation of work organisation*. Unpublished report for the European Commission (available at [www.ukwon.net](http://www.ukwon.net)).

## **APPENDIX 1: THE BERLIN DECLARATION**

## 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 policy 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.



## **WORK-IN-NET Coordination**

Dr. Claudio Zettel  
phone: +49 (0)228 3821 306  
E-Mail: [Claudio.Zettel@dlr.de](mailto:Claudio.Zettel@dlr.de)

Project Management Organisation at DLR of the  
Federal Ministry of Education and Research

Heinrich-Konen-Strasse 1  
D - 53227 Bonn, Germany

<http://www.workinnet.org/>