



'The future of work and mental health'

Ensuring quality employment in an ever-changing context

9 October 2019 • 14:00 – 18:00
ICF SA - Avenue Marnix, 17, 1000 Brussels
Magritte meeting Room - 4^o floor

FINAL REPORT OF THE CAPACITY-BUILDING SEMINAR



BACKGROUND

[The European Alliance for Mental Health – Employment & Work](#) organised this event¹ on the eve of the World Mental Health Day 2019. The seminar, hosted by ICF, aimed at discussing how changes in the (future) world of work can impact mental health and well-being of workers, and what can be done to adequately address these changes. Ms Claudia Marinetti, Director of Mental Health Europe moderated the event, which was attended by over 50 participants with representatives from the European Commission, OECD, business, academia, practitioners, social partners, civil society and advocacy organisations.

This report briefly summarises the discussions of each panel and highlights the main recommendations that resulted from them.

Setting the context

New technologies and the digital age are driving forces in the way we work and the way we understand work. Globalisation and demographic changes are also playing a pivotal role in reshaping the working structures - how, where, how much and when we work.

With appropriate preparation, employee participation and regulations, the introduction of new technologies can lead to better safety measures and more productivity. Digitalisation might allow for more flexibility to combine work with other activities contributing to work-life balance, while providing access to the labour market for people that might otherwise be excluded (i.e. people needing jobs with flexible working hours). However, there are challenges on the way. According to an [analysis](#) by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) an increasing number of jobs will soon be performed by machines and likely undergo significant changes on how they are carried out. Digitalisation and changes in the world of work are leading to the rise of non-standard forms of employment, which might not necessarily mean access to quality employment. Job insecurity, fluctuation of income, lack of work structures, eligibility to access health and social protection are just some of the aspects to consider when looking at the ongoing changes in work and employment.

These trends can have a negative impact on the well-being and mental health of workers and also further raise inequalities in society when it comes to access to employment. Workers in vulnerable situations, such as people with psychosocial disabilities, can easily end up being left behind and exit or have difficulties entering the labour market. In the insufficiently unregulated labour market which the changing future of work could bring, new jobs may come with lower social protection coverage, poorer access to training opportunities and fewer possibilities for career progression than traditional open-ended jobs. A [joint OECD-European Commission report](#) found that costs of mental ill-health to the labour market (lower employment and lower productivity) annually amount to EUR 240 billion across all Member States of the European Union (EU), namely 1.6% of their GDP. However, when it comes to prioritisation both in terms of political and financial agendas, the topic remains poorly addressed.

It does not have to be that way. If well-understood, timely tackled and underpinned by adequate policies and legislation, changes in the world of work can be beneficial for all and contribute to the

¹ Additional information on the event is available [here](#).

implementation of important rights (the European Pillar of Social Rights), global and European goals (UN Agenda 2030 SDGs, Europe 2020 Strategy targets). Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) measures could be adapted to adequately address the physical and mental needs of workers as a form of prevention. Policies and commitments could focus on individuals to provide support in remaining and/or (re)entering employment, which could prove particularly beneficial for people in vulnerable situations, including people with psychosocial disabilities.

FROM THE GROUND: PERSONAL TESTIMONY OF A PERSON WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

Sharing his personal story, Mr Paul Gelissen allowed the audience to get an insight into the experience of people with mental health problems. In particular, he highlighted the challenges in the labour and social environment which, in his view, will probably deepen in the future. In fact, because of the high automation, competition among workers is likely to increase dramatically and this will push employers to disregard people facing any type of vulnerable situation.



However, he also pointed out that some actions could reverse this trend and significantly improve the conditions of people with mental health problems. For example, he stressed the need to **increase awareness of mental health in the workplace, both for employers and employees**. People with mental ill-health should learn how to speak openly about it if they wish, while employers should work to create a safer and non-discriminatory environment towards them. Importantly, he also highlighted the **need to break the current equation between mental ill-health and the incapability to work**. Individuals with experience of mental health problems can, on the contrary, achieve better results in some specific areas of work thanks to their personal expertise, which should be valued and publicly acknowledged.



SETTING THE SCENE: WHAT ARE THE CURRENT CHANGES IN THE WORLD OF WORK AND WHAT DO THEY TELL US ABOUT THE FUTURE AND MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES?

Mr Prinz, Senior Labour Market Analyst from the *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)*, presented a global perspective on the connection between mental health and work. Despite common belief, most people with mental health problems are currently employed. However, this group of people is also more at risk when it comes to un- and underemployment, sickness-related absenteeism or presenteeism as well as productivity and income loss. According to the OECD, the mental health of the population is a multifaceted but fortunately, it is an increasingly better-understood policy issue than before.

Overall, Mr Prinz explained that the job market is rapidly changing, and the digital revolution will strongly affect it. According to OECD's projections, **some jobs will disappear, and many will change. This will particularly affect middle-skilled workers and people with vulnerability**, which in turn will create a job polarisation and increase inequalities. Furthermore, non-standard forms of work are estimated to become the norm, as well as the necessity for people to regularly change career throughout their working life. This will pose policy-makers with some questions, for example how to regulate these new forms of employment and redefine social security rights. With this regard, some of the OECD's recommendations include to **carry out early interventions**, as opposed to the reactive actions policy-makers are used to; to **integrate better cross-sectoral approaches** by schools, employers and businesses, employment services and the mental health care sector; to **involve a wider variety of stakeholders** in the process (from the educational, health as well as the labour system). Bringing in unemployment and re/upskilling services into the health care system a person suffering from physical or mental health problems uses would represent a good cross-sectoral intervention.



LOOKING FORWARD: THE FUTURE OF WORK AND ITS IMPACT ON THE WELL-BEING OF YOUNGER GENERATIONS

Ms Sanallah, Policy Officer on Social & Economic Inclusion at the *European Youth Forum*, gave an overview of the [main challenges and opportunities](#) of the future of work and youth. Her organisation identified five key themes that will be at the centre of these discussions, namely: skills, access to social protection, workers' rights and wellbeing, environmental concerns and equality. As a result of digitalisation, information and communication technology², **almost all jobs in the future will be expected to require some level of digital skills**. Yet, such skills are not being sufficiently developed through traditional educational system. In addition, today, many young people struggle to find quality-jobs, thus opt for **new non-standard forms of employment** such as platform work. On the one hand this gives access to remunerated work³, but on the other there is a risk that this work might not be of sufficient quality. Furthermore, there may be higher health risks and less social protection.

² Including Artificial Intelligence (AI)

³ However, issues of minimum wage/income remain

Work-life balance was found to be a top priority for young people. Yet, in the future this will be increasingly hard to achieve as many of them will be contended between their working life and the informal care they will have to provide to the (old) members of their families. Furthermore, the increased use of technology has meant that the line between private and working lives is becoming increasingly blurred. Constant connectivity has become so normalised that many young people do not make a distinction between their 'digital lives' and their 'offline lives', with the result that they can be contacted at all hours. To increase the quality of employment of young people and tackle some of these challenges, **trade unions will have an important role to play**, but today the affiliation of young people is very low. Collective bargaining is key to ensure quality employment and without the work of trade unions, young people are at greater risks of violations of their rights related to employment. In addition, the concept of **collective bargaining** should be further investigated, as new models of work will increasingly involve non-traditional relationships, that will make it hard to identify the employer and consequently the bargaining counterpart.

Overall, all these trends should provide the **opportunity to reflect on the role and value of work** in society and people's lives. Changes to the nature of work should lead to discussions on the value and recognition of other contributions to society.



WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO ENSURE WELL-BEING AT WORK?

Having set the scene and explaining challenges and opportunities ahead in the Future of Work debates in Europe, the event proceeded with a panel discussion on the way forward to ensure well-being at work for all. The panel of experts exchanged views in an interactive manner and provided recommendations to policymakers.

Ms Veronika Jakl, occupational psychologist at the Austrian organisation *Arbeitspsychologie Jakl* opened the floor and highlighted the [factors that will deeply undermine the well-being at work](#). Among the most important elements, she mentioned digitalisation, the increased speed requested to deliver tasks at work, as well as the increasing need and thus demand from workers of a work-life balance.

Building on these ideas, Mr Martin Jefflén, President of *Eurocadres*, added the importance of creating awareness on the transition from job to job that will occur in the future. With this regard, he stressed

that lifelong learning will be key for allowing individuals to remain skilled and attractive in the job market of the future.

Ms Simone Mohrs, Policy Officer from the *European Hospital and Healthcare Employers' Association (HOSPEEM)* highlighted the unequal attention that policymakers reserve to mental health vis-à-vis physical health. In her view, while the second is adequately addressed, mental health remains poorly discussed in the political and social debate.



Overall, speakers agreed on the fact that today, discussions on how to guarantee such well-being vary widely between EU countries. Cultural factors remain key as a driver for business changes. In this regard, it was highlighted that the [Framework Directive \(89/391/EEC\)](#) on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work already offers the legislative ground, but many challenges remain because of its patchy implementation and enforcement across the EU. Three aspects were mentioned for being particularly at stake: the poor realisation of prevention and risk assessment plans, addressing psychosocial risks, the lack of a multi-disciplinary approach and the involvement of stakeholders. A strong call for a new piece of legislation came from Mr Jefflén, who called for the adoption of a Directive on Psychosocial Risks, while highlighting all the limits of the current legislation. In line with this proposal, Ms Jakl highlighted the need of having concrete sector-specific tools, to be developed through an understandable and effective language which would make it easy its dissemination. A different approach was proposed by Ms Mohrs, who noted that what works for the health sector is when employers and trade unions get together at local level to effect concrete change. Compliance with the law incentivises employers, but much more compelling are the sound economic arguments for investing in a healthy and productive workforce, resulting in better staff retention and motivation and a better service to patients.

Addressing the question of further actions in this field, Ms Maria Teresa M. de Almeida, Policy Advisor in the *European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion*, referred that Framework Directive 89/391/EEC already imposes the obligation on employers to evaluate all risks, including of psychosocial nature and to put in place the resulting preventive and protective measures and that the most important it is to foster a genuine prevention and achieve effective application and enforcement. She commented that there is no one-size-fits-all approach in this area, as many aspects do depend on Member States' approach and companies' specificities on this subject. Existing EU actions are already based on prevention and protection measures; prevention-enabling environments should be cultivated amongst employers and employees and

successful approaches rely on interdisciplinarity. Regarding the future work of the European Commission on this area, Ms de Almeida also explained that could not provide more information as currently the Commission is in a period of transition while waiting for a new Commission to take function.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ Policymakers should allocate more resources and give greater attention to prevention of mental health problems in occupational settings. This should be done by making use of existing data and evidence on the matter.
- ✓ Stakeholders working in different sectors (such as education, health, environment) should collaborate towards a more integrated approach to address occupational mental health problems, instead of working in silos.
- ✓ Trade union representatives should increase their efforts to include youth in their work.
- ✓ Employers should improve their knowledge on how better use the unique skills of people who have experienced mental ill-health, as they can be considered 'experts by experience'.
- ✓ Prevention authorities should better cooperate with each other and increase their dialogue.
- ✓ For some participants, in order to adequately and comprehensively address psychosocial risks in the workplace, EU institutions may explore options to further elaborate on the introduction of relevant legal instruments on this subject.
- ✓ Social partners should raise their voice in the policymaking process and give more visibility to mental health issues and the role of employer and trade union initiatives on local level in this regard.
- ✓ Employers in managerial and leadership roles should be supported to better address mental health as well as to make effective use of tools and knowledge to provide people with mental health problems with the right support to enter or remain in employment.
- ✓ Ideally, all European companies should address psychosocial risks in their operational guidelines, minimum wage discussions or debate on ethics in artificial intelligence.
- ✓ Transformational leadership and peer-to-peer support are needed.
- ✓ For some participants, Framework Directive on Occupational Health and Safety should focus better on enforcement and implementation and should address missing provisions for psychosocial risks. EU-OSHA surveys at the national level should address these matters as well. Also, the EU Steering Group on Health Promotion and Disease Prevention could offer additional support towards ensuring high protection of mental health due to the changing nature of work.
- ✓ European Pillar of Social Rights should be able to address these matters better from a rights-based perspective.