



The impact of digitalisation on job quality and social dialogue in public services across the EU

Looking for a needle in a haystack? Digitalisation, job quality and social dialogue in Poland

Executive summary

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Introduction

This Research paper presents the Polish case study of the European Commission-funded project 'DIGIQU@LPUB', which examines the impact of digitalisation on job quality and social dialogue in the public services in three sectors: electricity, public administration and healthcare. Conclusions were drawn from desk research (literature, legal acts, strategic documents and statistical records) and from field research. Thirteen individual interviews were conducted with trade union representatives and three focus groups were organised with employees in the sectors under scrutiny. In addition, an online survey was conducted with a sample of 447 employees in public administration, 47 in healthcare and 32 in the electricity sector. Due to the small sample sizes in the latter two sectors, the survey data only complement the qualitative data analysis for illustrative purposes.

Background information

In Poland, the main strategic document in force in recent years determining the country's medium- and long-term economic policy was the 'Strategy for Responsible Development until 2020 – Looking ahead to 2030', adopted in 2017. It contained two key points on the issue of digitalisation: E-Administration and Digitalisation. At the same time, specific programmes such

as the 'Programme for the Integrated Informatisation of the State', the 'National Broadband Plan', 'Skills in the information society' and the 'Open Data Programme' are being implemented. Our study demonstrates that many advanced digital tools have been implemented in recent years in the public service sectors under scrutiny. The magnitude of the impact of digital tools on the situation of workers varies from sector to sector.

The digitalisation process is particularly advanced in the electricity sector, consisting of four large groups, partly owned by the State Treasury, where intensive modernisation of power plants and transmission networks has already been underway for more than three decades. Currently, the country's electricity infrastructure is fundamentally digitalised and various digital tools (such as systems and programmes for supervising production processes, for monitoring and servicing the transmission network or for servicing customers remotely) are used extensively by employees. Additionally, tools have been introduced in recent years to improve the sale of electricity to the end user, based on remote and automated solutions. In the case of the healthcare sector, in addition to specialised equipment for diagnosing and treating patients, and its integration with hospital IT systems, important innovations in recent years include tools for the electronic exchange of documents (e.g. e-prescriptions, e-referrals) between doctors and patients. What is more, a system for electronic medical records is currently being developed, ensuring that these can be exchanged between hospitals. The digitalisation of public administration is stimulated by the 'Programme for the Integrated Informatisation of the State'. A single portal will be created for citizens, from which they can handle a significant number of issues. Internet portals already enable the issuing of identity documents and dealing with mandatory social security matters, among other things. Digital document circulation between public institutions (e.g. by means of electronic document management systems) is also increasingly taking place.

Key findings

The assessment of both the importance of digitalisation and its impact on job quality varies between the sectors surveyed. Representatives of the electricity sector consider this process to be fundamental and essential to the operation of the sector, while pointing out some challenges that the implementation of certain technologies implies for employees, typically adding to their workload. Interviewees pointed out that the impact on working conditions varies over time: the introduction of digital tools initially results in increased work intensity and longer working hours. Once they are fully adopted, their impact on these aspects of work is seen as positive. The study also revealed that the implementation process depends to a large extent on the attitudes and skills of managers. It was also highlighted that digitalisation leads to an increase in the efficiency of the electricity network and the quality of the services provided to consumers. Digitalisation in the sector has also had a positive impact on health

and safety. In contrast, there has been no significant impact on the work-life balance, apart from for office workers, who can work more from home thanks to digitalisation. The respondents are convinced that digitalisation does not, in principle, lead to a reduction in the number of jobs.

In healthcare, digitalisation has had a more limited impact on both work content and employment conditions. Representatives of the sector indicate that, in general, digital tools, if implemented correctly, streamline work and reduce the burden of administrative duties. The problem may be a lack of diligence in the process of implementing digital solutions or an ill-considered way of implementing them. An example of this is the obligation to keep digital and 'paper' records in parallel, which is severely hampering mid-level medical staff in some hospitals. Provision of training in new tools, especially in the field of telemedicine, enabled new solutions to be adopted smoothly, although some older employees had a problem with getting used to them. On the other hand, there has been no significant impact on the nature of the tasks performed. Digital tools also have had no significant impact on various aspects of working conditions, such as working time schedules or autonomy, as these are specifically regulated in the healthcare sector and depend on factors other than the technologies used by employees, such as the applicable legislation or job hierarchy. Therefore, with some exceptions, there has been no impact on the work-life balance. On the other hand, the implementation of digital tools has not resulted in a reduction in the number of jobs, with still very serious labour shortages and ageing of employees in the healthcare sector.

In the public administration, digital tools, firstly, standardise administrative processes, making them more transparent and improving the circulation of information. At the same time, digitalisation, in the opinion of both survey participants and interviewees, has contributed to increased work intensity. This is true for employees in all levels of the administration, including the Social Insurance Institution; however, it should be considered that in the years when digitalisation took place, the responsibilities of Polish civil servants also increased, due to greater regulatory complexity and implementation of European Union law. Digitalisation, in the opinion of the respondents, increased the routine nature of the tasks performed, but also the autonomy of employees in organising their work, and improved cooperation with colleagues. At the same time, it contributed to better management of subordinates by superiors. The study revealed the adverse impact of digitalisation on employees' health – intensive computer work leads to musculoskeletal and visual problems. According to respondents and interviewees, the level of training on digital tools is unsatisfactory.

Social dialogue on the issue of digitalisation in the sectors studied is very weak in Poland at various levels, from national to company level. This is, moreover, a feature of social dialogue

in the country in general, which is influenced, among other things, by the low level of unionisation of employees, the low collective bargaining coverage, with agreements concluded mainly at company level, and the lack of interest among the employers' organisations in participating in collective bargaining. Although the electricity sector stands out positively in terms of the level of unionisation and collective bargaining coverage, digitalisation is not a prominent topic of negotiation between the social partners in any of the three sectors studied. Digitalisation is also only rarely on the agenda of the tripartite sectoral dialogue bodies, which have a consultative function: the government side initiates the implementation of digital tools, while the trade union side plays a reactive role. Adequate dialogue is also lacking at the company level – there were many complaints about the absence of consultation on digital tools to be implemented. At the same time, digitalisation can lead to improvements in the exercise of workers' rights to engage with trade unions. Many organisations use new remote methods of communication, which improve their operation and allow for more effective acquisition of new members.

Conclusion and policy pointers

The overall conclusion from the cross-sectoral analysis is that the impact of digitalisation on working conditions, employee well-being and job satisfaction is rather positive in Poland. The assessment of digital solutions may be less positive than it could be, due to the flawed or at least suboptimal way in which they are implemented. This may also be due to the weakness of social dialogue at both the national and sectoral level, where consultation takes place on the legislative changes accompanying the implementation of digital tools, and at the workplace level, where there are often no strong trade unions, a superficial dialogue with staff is conducted and there are no effective consultation mechanisms. In general, the digitalisation of public services is driven by the state. It is the government that takes the initiative and therefore has a decisive influence on the design of the tools being introduced. The role of the trade unions is reactive: they are always at least one step behind new digitalisation trends.

In view of the fundamental structural failures of the national social dialogue system, it is difficult to formulate far-reaching recommendations on the specific topic of digitalisation. Undoubtedly, trade unions need to be encouraged to broaden their scope of interest to include new trends (such as digitalisation), whereas so far, they have mainly focused on basic aspects of employment conditions, such as wages. The prospect of involvement of the trade union side in shaping selected policies at the national level is very promising, one particular example being the right to disconnect (considered an important issue by many workers in Poland), as well as issues of financing and training in new technologies. At the company level, trade unionists should use all legal and organisational possibilities to more effectively influence the

shape of the new digital tools, by engaging in consultations on specific solutions, taking account of their ergonomics and user-friendliness. This will help raise the profile of the unions and improve their image in the eyes of workers, as actors which effectively address new developments in the labour market.

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