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

Final scientific report of the DIGIQU@PUB project

Executive summary

1. DIGIQU@LPUB in action: scope and partners

The impact of digitalisation on job quality and social dialogue in the public services (DIGIQU@LPUB) is a European Commission-funded project aiming at assessing the impact of digitalisation on job quality, from the perspective of trade unions and of public service workers. This project was led by the European Social Observatory (OSE) in co-application with the European Public Services Union (EPSU) and ran from November 2021 to September 2023, involving eleven European partners. It covered eight countries (Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Spain) and considered workers' occupations in three public services: public electricity production and supply services, the public administrations sector (national, regional and local levels) and public hospital and health services.

DIGIQU@LPUB, coordinated by the European Social Observatory (Belgium), involved 11 partner institutions:
a) seven trade union-related research institutes – Fondazione Giuseppe di Vittorio (FDV, Italy), Secafi (France), the Institut Arbeit und Technik (IAT, Germany), the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA, Poland), IRES Emilia Romagna (Italy), Fundación 1 º de Mayo (Spain), and the European Social Observatory (OSE, Belgium);
b) an independent research centre – ÉTOSZ (Hungary);
c) Two universities – Aalborg University (Denmark) and an expert from the Department of Social Research, University of Turku (Finland);
d) The European Public Services Union (EPSU)

2. Objectives of the project

The purpose of the research project "The impact of digitalisation on job quality and social dialogue in the public services" (DIGIQU@LPUB) is to help fill the gap in our understanding of the concrete impacts of digitalisation on job quality in the public services in the European Union, and of the inclusion or otherwise of this topic in sectoral and interprofessional social dialogue in the countries scrutinised in the research.

More specifically, the aim of the research was twofold, considering the topic from two perspectives. A first part of the research shed light on the perception of public service workers themselves of the changes generated by digitalisation in the nature, content and implementation processes of the tasks involved in their daily jobs, as well as the outcomes of these changes for the workers themselves (physical and mental health, work-life balance, learning, job security, rights). These individual perceptions were mainly gathered, in the eight countries studied, through an online survey among workers in the three sectors (5,597 responses), in addition to material from national focus groups of workers in each of the three sectors. Desktop research and a range of semi-structured interviews were used for the second area of research – how the challenges and opportunities for job quality generated by the digitalisation of work in public services are included and addressed in the dynamics and practices of national and sectoral social dialogue in the eight countries.

3. DIGIQU@LPUB key findings

The project highlights that, even more than the previous wave of technological transformation in public services, the digitalisation of work has spread rapidly to all the aspects of daily work, via individual devices such as laptops, tablets and smartphones, and the so-called Internet of Things (IoT). The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a powerful catalyst in accelerating and intensifying the use of digitalised work among private and public workers.

The findings of the project show that the nature of these changes for public services and their workers has been ambivalent. On the one hand, digitalisation undeniably contributes to a certain improvement in the work carried out by public service workers, and hence in the quality of the services provided, enhancing efficiency and effectiveness. On the other hand, the impacts of digitalisation on work can be less positive than expected. For instance, while digitalisation has increased workers' autonomy by automating repetitive tasks, new digitalised routine tasks have emerged (e.g. reporting), resulting in an 'autonomy paradox' for workers. Digitalisation has increased the flexibility of work in public services by making it possible to work outside traditional workplaces and working hours (remote work) at any time and in any

place. This increased spatio-temporal flexibility can be detrimental to the work-life balance and can generate stress (since the person is always connected). This concern must be taken into account in social dialogue and the prevailing legal framework (right to disconnect).

The evidence collected in the DIGIQU@LPUB project showed ambiguous perceptions among public service workers of the impact of digitalisation on the features of their job quality. There have been both positive and negative impacts, wide-ranging and experienced differently depending on the individual characteristics of the workers, their occupational profiles and the tasks performed in the course of their daily work, as well as on the specific features of each public service. This aggregated overview masked a certain variability between the aspects of job quality, the sectors and the countries considered.

The impact of digitalisation on social dialogue again varied, reflecting the diversity of industrial relations systems, not only between countries, but also between the three sectors, and even within each of them. The legal status of employment relationships (private vs. public) is of great importance, as are the presence or absence of a national and/or sectoral level of collective bargaining, the degree of unionisation, and the quality of worker involvement and collective negotiation in the workplace.

National and sectoral unions had a generally favourable view of the ongoing digital transition, although there is no lack of concern regarding its implicit risks for employment, work organisation, privacy and union rights. With explicit references to digitalisation remaining scarce in collective agreements, an informal search for solutions and the reliance on information and consultation practices seem to prevail.

4. Recommendations

Against this background, we provided recommendations as to how to address the ambivalent impacts of digitalisation on job quality of workers in these three public services in the EU. We recommend:
- providing workers with adequate training and opportunities to learn digital skills;
- involving them from design to implementation of work digitalisation processes and tools;
- improving the financing of public services, to foster a sustainable and fair digital transition for public service workers;
- carrying out systematic impact assessments and encouraging dedicated scientific research.

We recommend that trade unions adopt a holistic approach to social dialogue at both national and EU level, focused on guaranteeing individual and collective rights, lifelong learning, and joint monitoring of the ongoing changes. Union strategies also require new internal approaches, competences, tools and organisational means in order to address more effectively the representation needs of workers.

5. Research output

The **eight national case studies and their executive summaries** (in English and in the respective national languages) were published as OSE working papers in 2023. The **two cross-cutting analytical reports**, on impacts of digitalisation on job quality and social dialogue practices, were published in the OSE papers series in 2023. **Two policy briefs** offering a summary and policy recommendations were also published as OSE Policy Briefs, with translations in French and German (see website of the project). The **final scientific report** of the project has been published in English, French and German. The present executive summary is available in 9 languages: Danish, English, French, Finnish, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish and Spanish.

This More detailed information on the project and the project partnership, as well as access to documents, is available through the web page of the project: www.digiqualpub.eu