



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

Handling the diverse effects of digitalisation on job quality: technology-positive workers and strong social dialogue in the Danish public sector

Executive summary

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Introduction

The Danish public sector is among the most digitalised in the world, and Denmark therefore serves as a good case for assessing the impact of digitalisation on job quality and the work environment. This Research paper addresses the relationship between digitalisation and job quality through a review of the relevant policies, the existing research literature, a European wide survey and through qualitative research conducted for this project. The qualitative data was collected in three specific sectors – the public administration, hospitals and electricity production and distribution – and emphasises the experiences of public sector workers. First, ten interviews were conducted with sector-level (and a few national-level) worker representatives from the relevant unions. Next, a focus group was conducted in each of the three sectors with workers, to probe their daily experiences of what digitalisation means for job quality and their daily work experience. While the focus groups emphasised the personal experiences of the workers, many of them are shop stewards and hence have a broader perspective on what their co-workers may experience. These data were supplemented by a cross-national European survey, which, however, did not get a very high response rate in Denmark. So, the results from the survey mainly supplement the qualitative data.

Key findings

The results show that most of the changes and impact experienced by the workers do not relate directly to the technologies but, rather, to the organisation of work and the organisational handling and implementation of new technologies. Digitalisation of the Danish public sector is quite advanced, and the changes were perceived by the workers as comprehensive, but incremental. The workers in general have a positive attitude towards digitalisation, which in many cases is seen as improving workflows and labour processes as well as making the public sector more efficient. Nonetheless, they would strongly urge a more carefully designed implementation and more reflection on the purpose and advantages of different technologies. The workers in general reported that most policymakers and top management still have an overly tech-optimistic perspective and tend to downplay the implementation challenges. Additionally, workers often feel that there is not enough time for implementing the technologies before new changes and technologies are introduced. This suggests that successful digitalisation requires a close collaboration between workers and management. Many workers in the study felt they have a good collaboration with the local level management, but that digitalisation processes were imposed on them top-down from the political system and top management. While digitalisation and new technologies have been linked in public debates to fear of significant job reductions, this was not evident at all in our data; almost the opposite, the workers stressed the need for improved technology to handle the workload and staff shortages.

Overall, the Danish labour market and industrial relations system is characterised by a consensual approach of the social partners, while at the same time both trade unions and employers' association have the strength to produce outputs that are seen as beneficial by both sides. This is also reflected in how digitalisation is handled, at the national, regional, and local level. Here the social partners have taken a pragmatic approach in finding ways to implement new technologies. The social partners have an overall positive assessment of new technology both in terms of potential improvements in efficiency and in working conditions, but with the unions paying close attention to the potential downsides of the development. Accordingly, the implementation of new technology has not caused much change in social dialogue and industrial relations. Most of the issues are addressed at the local level between the social partners. In the public sector this is mainly handled in the local cooperation committees.

Our data generally shows that workers, like their unions, have a positive stance towards digitalisation across the three sectors, although we found variations. The hospital sector was where we identified most optimism, as new technologies had, generally, both improved productivity and reduced strenuous and repetitive work. While technologies had improved the

physical work environment, however, the responses regarding the psycho-social work environment were more mixed, as digitalisation can potentially increase stress owing to the faster pace of work and the blurred lines between professional and private life. Many workers did, in fact, emphasise that stress levels had gone up. This finding was iterated in the public administration sector, where interviewees were calling for common guidelines to ensure a better work-life balance. Further, the need for intra-technological communication was emphasised mainly in the hospitals and in the public administration sector, which are both highly digitalised sectors characterised by a variety of tools and technologies needing cooperation. Our findings from both sectors, therefore, raise the concern that when implementing technologies, the various technologies must be able to work together to ease procedures. In the electricity sector, we found that digitalisation had not changed the work itself much but, rather, the labour processes surrounding it. The electricity sector appears to be where workers were most sceptical about digitalisation, highlighted by the ambiguous relationship between lack of autonomy versus flexibility, depending on the way technologies were utilized in the specific workplace (which appears interlinked with the level of skill-upgrading). This again points to the overarching conclusion that the implementation, upgrading and organisational handling of technologies seem to be of greatest concern.

Despite these cautionary points, it is important to stress that several workers across the sectors highlighted that digitalisation had made their job more interesting and stimulating. In several cases, workers mentioned that the technology had 'moved' professionalism rather than 'removed' it. Clearly, the extent to which workers felt able to 'move along' with technological development varied, and our general impression is that younger workers found it easier to do so than older workers (although this also depends on personal preferences). In sum, the impact of digitalisation on job quality can best be described as ambiguous and very subjective: what for one worker is an improvement in job quality is a deterioration for another. While the overall impact on job quality is ambiguous, the main tendency seems to be that digitalisation has the potential for improving both public services and the working life of the public sector workers, if implemented and adjusted to the needs of both citizens and these workers.

Conclusion and policy pointers

Based on the research project, we highlight some important implications for future policies, to ensure a balanced trajectory in terms of implementation of new technology, for the consideration of policymakers and other key actors. These cover three broad aspects: Firstly, it is important to ensure the right organisation and management of implementation and decision-making on what technologies to implement. There is a need to ensure that technologies are fully implemented and utilised, and therefore to prioritise certain

technological and digital projects; in this way, the public sector workers are not overburdened by implementing new technologies, which may result in poor implementation and stressful working conditions. Secondly, and in concurrence with the existing literature, the workers must be involved in the processes and the implementation if the digital projects are to be successful. Only by involving workers, but also end-users such as citizens, can it be ensured that the solutions are adapted to people working with this on a daily basis and thus applying the technologies. Thirdly and finally, there is a strong need for ongoing updating of the skill level of everybody involved in the digital technologies: this applies to both specific skills and generic digital skills, and to all groups of public sector workers, not only workers with higher, formal educational attainments.

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Referring to this publication: Refslund B. and Borello A. (2023) Handling the diverse effects of digitalisation on job quality: technology-positive workers and strong social dialogue in the Danish public sector. DIGIQU@LPUB project. OSE Working Paper Series, Research Paper No. 53, Brussels: European Social Observatory, July.

With the financial support of the

