



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

Digitalisation without social dialogue in France: the ambivalent effects on the job quality of public services workers

Executive summary

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Introduction

This Research Paper analyses the impact of digitalisation on job quality and social dialogue in France in three public service sectors: electricity suppliers, public administrations and hospitals. This report is part of a larger European research project on 'The impact of digitalisation on job quality and social dialogue in the public services (DIGIQU@LPUB)', led by the European Social Observatory (OSE) and funded by the European Commission. This work also benefits from support from the European Public Services Union (EPSU).

In recent years, public sector workers are increasingly using connected organising tools and methods that shape the way their job tasks are implemented, scheduled and monitored. In this context, the project aims to: (a) assess the impact of digitalisation on aspects of job quality, from the perspective of trade unions but also of public service workers themselves; and (b) investigate how the challenges and opportunities for job quality generated by the digitalisation of work in public services are addressed in social dialogue (at national and sectoral levels) in selected EU Member States.

The main sources of data used to address the research question include interviews conducted with trade unionists; sectoral focus groups with field workers; and data from an original web survey.

Background information

France ranks 12th overall among the Member States in the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) and is situated around the European average in 2022. The digital skills of the French population are better than the EU average, while France scores around the EU average in terms of digital public services.

In the electricity sector, digitalisation has been underway for the past twenty years. The launch of the Linky meter, the increase in electricity needs and the decentralisation of the production system have accelerated this digitalisation process and have given increasing weight to data and data processing. Employees' day-to-day work in the sector has evolved and become digital, in line with the modernisation of electrical systems. In particular, the day-to-day work of technicians has evolved considerably with the systematic use of digital work orders. The tablet has become their main tool for work, instruction, documentation, data entry and reporting. In the HR departments, administrative procedures and employee files have been completely digitalised. In the call centre department, employees now work with interactive voice servers. At the same time, emails and instant messaging tools are used far more, teleworking has been extended and artificial intelligence, virtual reality and robotics have begun to emerge.

In the public administration sector, digital transformation has been implemented through several State-level reforms since the late 2000s. This digitalisation takes different forms, including online services and information to the public, interconnection between public services and departments, shared platforms for staff, computers/tablets/smartphones, teleworking and videoconferencing. Three-quarters of the relationships between the French population and the public institutions now take place digitally. Also, nearly one out of every two French citizens use the 'FranceConnect' unique identifier for digital public services.

Digitalisation in the (public) hospitals sector has developed in a context of decreasing resources. The widespread use of digital tools (computers and tablets), e-mails and intranet have enabled innovations (telemedicine and remote monitoring) which have offset the reduction in resources. A wide variety of software has been deployed, differing from one hospital to another and even from one department to another, creating operational rigidities (compatibility problems, training problems). Hospital civil servants are the public sector officials who telework least often. The administrative services are the only services within the hospital structure that can work remotely (one day per week or less).

Key findings

In terms of work content, jobs have developed very differently, but some important changes have occurred since the introduction of new digital processes/software/tools. New tasks (for instance related to software applications) have been added to existing jobs, which regularly include new administrative and data entry tasks (reporting for example), increasing the workload. In the electricity and hospital sectors, digital planning of the day and digitalisation of files enables optimisation and segmentation of tasks; each task is associated with a specific set time and contingencies are not included. Work intensification is observed for many jobs/professional positions in the three sectors.

In the three sectors, social and hierarchical ties have been loosened due to communication channels involving e-demands, e-mails or smartphones, often detrimental to general relationships between employees. Direct and physical interactions have very significantly declined, with a serious impact on work collectives.

The three sectors share some common history as well as key differences in the most recent period, explaining variations in collective bargaining activity. Until the mid-2000s, the electricity industry in France was part of the public sector, and as such was under the specific collective bargaining framework of the public services, which was at the time very limited in scope. Most recently, electricity has become part of the private sector and the scope of collective bargaining in the sector has been enlarged as a consequence: the trade unions make many demands, and there is intense negotiation on many topics (pensions, salaries, workforce and skills planning, etc.). In the public administration and in the hospital sectors, the scope of collective bargaining was very limited until quite recently. Only in 2019/2021 did some important changes to the social dialogue bodies take place: the scope of bargaining has been enlarged, and agreements in the public service have become binding.

For now, digitalisation is a relatively minor topic for collective bargaining in the public sector. In the electricity sector, the two main companies have concluded very few agreements related to digitalisation. The only exceptions are on the right to disconnect, teleworking, and monitoring the effect of teleworking and digitalisation. Neither is digitalisation a significant topic of social dialogue in hospitals and the public administration: the only national agreement concluded on the topic is the 2021 agreement on teleworking in the public service.

Conclusion and policy pointers

The research identified a number of recommendations as to how to channel the impacts of digitalisation on job quality and on social dialogue and ensure good related practices.

At the national level, a first recommendation would be to ensure that the implementation of new digital tools or approaches is jointly led by workers. An impact assessment on the consequences for employment must also be conducted before the implementation of new tools. The anticipated impacts must be taken into account in skills and career paths.

In terms of IT devices, various suggestions have been reported for the public administration sector, that also seem relevant to the hospital sector: (a) creation of a secured public IT hub at national or sectoral level to benefit workers (implementation of common digital tools, in particular software, national public 'Cloud', remote access, videoconferencing); (b) greater harmonisation of digital software between administrations, or even within a given administration; (c) a reflection on data and artificial intelligence (AI), which is becoming more and more central (issues of data security, ownership, respect of the users' private life). These questions refer broadly to fundamental rights and democracy.

It is also important to promote digital acculturation at different levels:

- Support and training of workers and managers to render work groups more effective in a digitalised context.
- Acculturation of political leaders, senior administrative officials (and employers in general) and particularly union representatives to the challenges of digitalisation. They should be given customized training, to remedy their lack of expertise on digitalisation and 'lagged' appropriation.
- Possibilities for direct contact between staff and users of public services (or re-opening of certain local administrations) should be addressed, for better inclusion of all sectors of the public.

More specifically on social dialogue, it seems important to:

- Significantly increase the amount of information-consultation on digitalisation in the employees' representative bodies.
- Go beyond a 'formal' social dialogue, with a need for a 'change of level' in collective bargaining and a widespread culture of negotiation among stakeholders. More generally, there is an increasing need for permanent social dialogue on digitalisation, to enable adaptation to a context of rapidly changing technologies.
- Extend the collective negotiations on digitalisation beyond 'teleworking' and the 'right to disconnect'. There must be an open and direct discussion of the impact of digitalisation on productivity gains and their distribution (and the link to work quality) between trade unions and the public employer.

- Give trade unions the capacity to negotiate the time set for a given task, in jobs where this applies, as this perspective currently seriously reduces autonomy and increases supervision.
- Include the new occupational diseases linked to digitalisation (such as burnout) in the list of recognised occupational diseases.

At the European level, it is important to note that a European agreement on digitalisation for central and federal government was signed by the social partners on 6 October 2022 and could be transformed into mandatory legislation by the Commission. This agreement could then be extended beyond the central administration, to all officials or employees of the public and private sectors providing a public service, in order to raise the level of protection against negative consequences of digitalisation in Europe. The goal of further adaptation of civil service working conditions (in a broad sense) to digitalisation is of prime importance.

Social Europe still needs to be built in the area of digitalisation. European trade unionists should deepen their involvement to increasingly weigh in on this topic at the European level, which will further impact the Member State level. This seems essential if digitalisation is to be of service to the population at large and to workers in particular.

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