



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

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### **From improvement to transformation? Digitalisation, industrial relations and job quality in the Italian public sector**

#### **Executive summary**

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##### **Introduction**

This Research paper is part of a 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 service workers are increasingly using connected organising tools and methods, which shape the way their job tasks are implemented, scheduled and controlled. In this context, the DigiQu@lpub project aims to: (a) assess the impact of digitalisation on job quality dimensions 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 the national and sectoral levels) in selected European Union (EU) Member States.

At the core of the project are eight case studies in as many countries: Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Spain. The project targets three public service

sectors: electricity suppliers, public administrations and hospitals. This Research paper contains the Italian case study. In addition to desk research, three sources of original data are used to address the research questions: interviews conducted with trade unionists and workers; focus groups with field workers; and data from an original web survey.

### **State of play and national strategies**

Italy ranks 18th out of 27 EU Member States in the 2022 edition of the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI). Notwithstanding, the situation in Italy has improved in recent years, driven by efforts by policymakers and social partners to first implement an 'Industry 4.0' strategy, as well as a digitalisation strategy for the public sector. Our research revealed a highly variable landscape, both geographically and between the specific ministries and public agencies. In fact, despite the overall low ranking of Italy in DESI, we also found examples of highly digitalised processes. The arrival of Next Generation EU funds (notably through the Recovery and Resilience Facility), with their emphasis on digitalisation, should increase the impact of digitalisation on all aspects of the public sector, moving from a focus primarily on achieving efficiencies through process improvements toward a true digital transformation of the workplace.

### **The impact of digitalisation on job quality**

The overall impact of digitalisation on job quality in the analysed sectors depends very much on the technology adopted, the relationships with external stakeholders as well as the specific pressures on the organisation (e.g., competition, shareholder expectations and labour shortages in the case of the liberalised and privatised electricity sector; increasing efficiency, flexibility and quality of services in the public administration). In the case of the electricity sector, some technologies such as drones and software management programs have overall increased job quality, as these instruments have favoured job safety, upskilling and work-life balance. However, the use of applications on smartphones has negatively impacted job quality, leading to greater work intensity, longer working days, and a reduction in safety in this sector.

With regard to the public administration, the key change brought about by digitalisation has been the possibility for employees to work outside of the office. This opportunity is still very limited in the Italian public administration, but those workers who experienced it, mainly during the Covid-19 pandemic, commented on the lack of adequate devices and technology infrastructure, the risk of overwork because they lack the abilities to organise their own work around objectives, and negative effects on mental health; nevertheless, workers appreciate the ability to achieve a better work-life balance as a result of remote work.

The hospital sector is maybe, among the three analysed, the sector that has experienced the most pervasive digitalisation: introduction of a wide range of technologies, such as robots in the operating room, tablets to collect data and monitor patient intake, and the implementation of electronic medical health records. In general terms digitalisation has improved job quality in hospitals, mainly by making the work-flow smoother and increasing safety.

### **The impact of digitalisation on social dialogue**

In recent years, as the pace of digitalisation has increased, impacting more and more areas within the public sector, social dialogue has had to adapt to take account of these changes, particularly given the impact of technology on work organisation, job quality, health and safety, job classification and employment. Unions' strategies include both attempts to govern the processes of change as they impact work organisation, as well as efforts to help workers adapt to the changes.

Bargaining in the electricity sector presents some important differences when compared to the public administration and hospital sector. First, bargaining within the electricity sector occurs following the rules and customs of private sector bargaining. Here the company-level agreement with Enel, the largest employer in the sector, is negotiated first and sets the tone for negotiating the sector-wide agreement. Second, specifically regarding digitalisation, electricity sector unions' strategies have focused on several areas: a) guaranteeing access to continuous training; b) job classification; c) regulation of remote work and the right to disconnect; d) using the rights to information and consultation to govern changes in work organisation; and e) bargaining that is inclusive of the entire value chain (including new renewable start-ups) and not just traditional actors.

Unions in the public administration and hospital sectors have used bargaining, joint examination and information and consultation to address the changes wrought by digitalisation. To address changes in work organisation (outside of the purview of collective bargaining in the public sector), the 2016-2018 collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) for the public administration and hospital sector required the creation of bilateral standing committees on innovation, which use information and consultation to monitor changes that impact work organisation and have the ability to propose changes themselves. In 2022, landmark CBAs were negotiated, covering 2019-2021, which include establishing the right to remote and agile work for all public employees, along with rules for governing the (decentralised) implementation of remote and agile work arrangements for individuals.

## **Conclusion and policy pointers**

The changes being driven by digitalisation are both profound (or radical) and sweeping (touching seemingly all jobs in all sectors). And because the social, political and economic context within which new technologies are developed and implemented has an impact on the balance of power in the workplace and society, the question of who will benefit from digitalisation is contested terrain. This reality, the non-neutrality of technology, opens possibilities of increased conflict in industrial relations, as well as increasing collaboration.

Ensuring that the benefits of new technology accrue evenly across society, and include especially workers, will require new levels of awareness and understanding of digitalisation, new skills, approaches to bargaining that include the entire value chain, and joint governance of change, including at the level of the workplace. Specifically, we recommend public policy efforts to increase awareness of the nature of digitalisation through: a) training for social partners; b) inclusive industrial relations practices that embrace the entire value-chain; and c) efforts to govern change in a tripartite manner. Successfully governing these changes for the mutual benefit of workers, organisations and users requires: a) a stronger legal and regulatory framework regarding the introduction of digital technology; b) providing social partners with the subject-matter expertise needed to effectively negotiate digital transformation; and c) experimentation with efforts to jointly implement changes through direct worker participation.

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**Referring to this publication:** Freddi D., Hancock M. and Leonardi S. (2023) From improvement to transformation? Digitalisation, industrial relations and job quality in the Italian public sector. DIGIQU@LPUB project. OSE Working Paper Series, Research Paper No. 56, Brussels: European Social Observatory, July.

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With the financial support of the

