

Digital Transformation of the Labour Market: An International Project of Social Partners for the Future of Employment

The European economy is increasingly under impact of digital transformation which is redefining operating models of business and labour markets. However, we need to acknowledge that the process of digitization of companies depends on the wealth of the country or region, and also on their size. Smaller companies tend to be less digital which has an impact on the employees they employ. Companies that use digital solutions to a limited extent tend to pay lower wages and are less likely to create new jobs. They are also less willing to provide training courses to their employees during the pandemic. We must also be aware that digital technologies - such as artificial intelligence, machine learning and industrial robots - have an impact on employment, wages, demand for skills and the polarization of jobs due to automation and skill-oriented technological change. Digital transformation often goes hand in hand with the automation of routine tasks, which often replaces low- and medium-skilled jobs. On the other hand, in order to take advantage of digital technologies, companies need to have a pool of skilled workers with the right skills. It is obvious that the situation is complicated so the objective of trade unions should be to define guidelines that will help balancing technological changes with social rights. Many aspects of labour policy will require deep revision and modernization. Digitalisation, automation and artificial intelligence, while representing a key opportunity to boost economic development and competitiveness, increase challenges to traditional employment models in relation to labour relations, labour standards, working conditions and social protection.

How to provide a soft landing for the labour market in time of transformation? How can we ensure that artificial intelligence and machine learning are technology solutions that work for people? What is the nature of the skills required in the fourth industrial revolution? Experts and participants of the project entitled Initiating Activities Implementing the Framework Agreement of the European Social Partners on Digitalisation are looking for answers to these questions and thus aim to prepare social partners from Poland, Italy, Romania, Lithuania and North Macedonia for the process of digital transformation of the labour market. The Project leading partner is the National Commission of NSZZ Solidarność trade union.



The Project is funded by the social partners with co-financing from the European Union and it focuses on the challenges, benefits and risks related to digital tools in the workplace. Expert efforts and training activities are addressed to social partners from five European countries and the main goal of the Project is to facilitate the implementation of the Agreement of European Social Partners on Digitalisation (EFAD) signed on June 22, 2020 through social dialogue in the Project countries.

This is the 7th autonomous agreement of European social partners, the implementation of which is initiated at the European level by the National Commission of NSZZ Solidarność through project funds which is an indisputable contribution to creating social relations and strengthening social dialogue both at the national and European level.

So far, the Project has collected and described 30 examples of good practices from five European countries. "As you can easily expect, the case studies showed differences in the degree of advancement of digitization processes in labour markets depending on the Project country," comments Barbara Surdykowska from the Expert Office of the NSZZ Solidarność trade union. Unfortunately, they also show that not everywhere trade unions are involved in these processes - adds the expert. The collected practices will be compared, analysed and assessed in the Final Project Report.

Under the Project we set out ambitious goals, including creating conditions for the development of National Action Plans which will prepare our respective countries for the implementation of the Agreement, including the implementation of the right to disconnect. We are doing so by making the necessary analyses of the existing legal and factual status and developing a catalogue of good practices.

The Project also aims to increase the knowledge of social partners on improving working conditions in the context of the right to disconnect, the ability to use digital tools and having right balance between private and professional life through training and dissemination activities. "The digital transformation of the labour market requires raising the awareness of trade union leaders regarding the need to acquire new skills in order to keep jobs in the future. Planned activities and developed products and results of the Project, including: a new training module, expert meetings, training courses and strategic documents will help to achieve this goal and will be available for download on the Project website," comments Karol Nosal, Project Manager from the European Programs Office of the NSZZ Solidarność trade union.



One of the goals of the project is to strengthen the right to disconnect

At present, the right to disconnect or to be off-line is a very big challenge. We have all noticed that the development of new communication technologies, including all types of chats, means that employees remain available to their line-managers and co-workers even after working hours. Unfortunately, this very often leads to fatigue, burnout and affects the mental well-being of the employee and their families. The right to disconnect is one of the topics of the European Digitalisation Agreement, but it has failed to establish binding solutions. Against this background, in June 2022, three European employers' organizations signed a social dialogue work program with the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), which included a commitment to negotiate a legally binding agreement on remote working, to be implemented in the form of a directive. Unfortunately, after more than a year of negotiations, in November 2023, two employer organizations did not present any proposals regarding the text of the agreement and withdrew from negotiations. The ETUC regrets that the employers were unable to provide a path to a successful conclusion of the talks.

Due to this development, the ETUC sent an appeal to the European Commission in which it emphasized the need to fill the legislative gap by presenting a directive that will guarantee the rights of remote workers, including: equal treatment and remuneration of teleworkers and those working stationary, the right to privacy and disconnection, protection against excessive control and the involvement of trade unions in shaping and implementing remote work.

However, before any likely legislative action by the European Commission takes place in the EFAD Project countries, action plans should be developed specifying activities in this area. In Poland, social partners are discussing the promotion of the following practices:

- setting up autoresponders in employees' mailboxes indicating:
 - a) that the employee is on holiday leave,
 - b) name of colleagues who may be contacted in urgent matters,
 - c) the employee's working hours with a statement that the response will be given within working hours,
- offering training for managers/all employees in respecting the right of subordinates/co-workers to undisturbed rest,



- offering meetings with a psychologist/career advisor on the need to take breaks from permanent online presence in social media or instant messengers in professional and private life.

Initiating Actions Implementing the Framework Agreement of the European Social Partners on Digitalisation Project contributes to better insight of the social partners into current and future trends in the labour market required for development of policies needed to ensure a just and inclusive transition. Artificial intelligence is entering the labour market at a dizzying pace and irreversibly, so the world of labour has to adapt to the changes as quickly as possible for the benefit of all.

EFAD Team

